On Faith and Miracle:

A Cosmological Perspective on Faith and Miracle as 'Social Categories of Understanding' in Brazilian Catholicism

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Abstract

The concepts of *faith* and *miracle* frequently appear in the anthropological literature on Christianity. Yet these phenomena are rarely employed as social categories of understanding, and this is particularly true for research related to Catholicism. By way of my own ethnographic experience in three different fieldwork sites of Brazil's Northeast (Agüera – where apparitions of the Virgin Mary occur; Monte Santo – a Catholic pilgrimage sanctuary; and Casa Amarela, a neighbourhood in Recife, the capital of Pernambuco state), I argue that a cosmological perspective is central to understanding Brazilian Catholicism. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, such a perspective reveals *faith* and *miracle* as key elements to an understanding of Catholicism as it is lived in this context. As such, I suggest rethinking *faith* and *miracle* as "social categories of understanding," which dialectically organize Catholic logic and cosmology: the interconnectivity of humans, nature, and the supernatural.

Key words: faith, miracle, Brazilian Catholicism, categories of undestanding.

Sobre Fé e Milagre:
uma perspectiva cosmológica da fé
e do milagre como "categorias de
entendimento" no catolicismo brasileiro

Resumo

Fé e *milagre* são temas frequentes na literatura antropológica sobre cristianismo. Contudo, estes fenômenos são raramente considerados analiticamente como categorias de entendimento, sendo isto especialmente verdade em relação ao catolicismo. Através de minha experiência etnográfica em três diferentes campos de pesquisa no Nordeste do Brasil (Angüera – onde ocorrem aparições da Virgem Maria; Monte Santo – um santuário de peregrinação católico; Casa Amarela – bairro populoso da cidade de Recife, capital de Pernambuco), argumento que adotar uma perspectiva cosmológica é central para compreender o catolicismo brasileiro. Além disso, e talvez o mais importante, tal perspectiva revela que *fé* e *milagre* são categorias chaves para a compreensão de como é vivido o catolicismo nesse contexto. Neste sentido, sugiro aqui repensar *fé* e *milagre* como "categorias sociais do entendimento", as quais dialeticamente organizam a lógica e cosmológica desse catolicismo, através da interconexão entre humanos, natureza e sobrenatureza.
Palavras-chave: fé, milagre, catolicismo brasileiro, categorias do entendimento.

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The ethnographer who 'wanders' about the religious field of Brazilian Catholicism, in particular, is no doubt struck by the importance and value of 'faith' (*fé*) and 'miracle' (*milagre*) in this specific context. Indeed, my own ethnographic research – conducted over the course of more than two decades – in three different areas of the Brazilian Northeast (Angüera, Monte Santo, and Casa Amarela-Recife) has made me more sensitive to these categories while also moving me to consider how best to articulate these phenomena in theoretical terms. Through a careful analysis of the ethnographic data I have gathered, I propose conceptualizing *faith* and *miracle* as 'social categories of understanding' employed by Catholics living in Brazil's Northeast.

As demonstrated by even a cursory look at the innumerable ethnographies on Catholicism in Brazil (ex. Zaluar 1983; Minayo 1994; Steil 1996; Campos 2013), it is clear that anthropologists recognize the importance of *faith* and *miracle* in their fieldwork sites. However, I believe that the way in which scholars have treated *faith* and *miracle* vis-à-vis their application as social categories fails to do justice to what the data actually offer, particularly regarding the concept of 'faith', and possibly extending to religions beyond the Brazilian context. This shortcoming primarily owes to the fact that the word 'faith' in the anthropological literature is more commonly employed as a synonym of a religious identity or specific religious practice (Badone 1990; Taylor 1995; Brandão 2004; Norget, Napolitano and Mayblin 2017) than as an autonomous anthropological concept. Indeed, contrary to what happens with the category of 'miracle', which has been regularly discussed (see below), 'faith' is not problematized, which seems to result from the fact that '[a]nthropologists have often regarded the latter as something beyond their analytical scope' (Miyazaky 2000: 44).

It is important to note, however, that the concept of 'faith' has been discussed – albeit in a marginal way – with greater relevance in certain Christian ethnographic contexts (ex. Elisha 2008; Mitchell and Mitchell 2008; Maynard 1993; Miyazaky 2000), including Pentecostal religions in Brazil (Swatowiski 2007). In their discussions, these authors offer points of divergence and overlap with each other, and they adopt approaches that seem to deviate, in greater or lesser degrees, from that which I intend to put forth here. To take one example, Swatowiski (2007) largely bases her analysis on the work of Giddens, arguing that faith contains pragmatic elements aligned with regulating forces which emerge as a positive experience, and from which trust in the system is derived. Building on Bourdieu's notion of 'practical faith' – the ability one has to participate in any given social field or activity – Mitchell and Mitchell (2008) argue that 'faith' is less a transcendence than a bodily performance, immanence. Differing in some ways from the Mitchells, Elisha (2008) seeks to understand the meaning of faith as a 'social fact', as a category of discourse and Christian practice, as social construction; faith emerges from this field as transcendence, encompassing thus emotion, reason, body, and mind. Agency is central in Miyazaky's (2000) analyses on faith. Advocating for the ethnographability of this phenomenon, the author insists that faith 'emerges not so much as a Kierkegaardian leap of belief in something beyond comprehension but as a capacity to place one's agency in abeyance' (2000: 32), in which faith, for the subjects, is constituted in experience, identity, and belief.

Dialoguing with these and other authors, the present article has two primary intentions. First, using ethnographic analyses of *faith* and *miracle*, this article advances an argument that such work requires treating both of these phenomena as 'social categories of understanding' (Mauss 1969; Descola 1992) in a way that is more critical and structured than in previous studies. For this approach, it is necessary to adopt a cosmological perspective derived from the (specifically Catholic) field[1]. Second, this article suggests that adopting this demarche creates an alternative that allows greater intelligibility among ethnographic fields that are different but related by way of their interest in these phenomena, within a perspective of an anthropology of Christianity, or, more precisely, an anthropology of Catholicism (Norget, Napolitano and Mayblin 2017).

In summary, I argue that within the Brazilian Catholic contexts in which I have done fieldwork, *faith* and *miracle* must be taken as social categories of understanding that organize the relationships that link humans, nature, and the supernatural, in which *faith* imposes itself as the broadest category. Here I consider the meanings of these terms and their specific uses in these particular contexts. Moreover, I insist that to understand the native sentiments attributed to faith and miracle, it is necessary to grasp the context of Brazilian Catholicism by way of a cosmological perspective, in which the world emerges and is constituted by the intertwining of nature-culture-supernatural. As such, I will begin by describing very briefly my ethnographic sites, after which I will offer a perspective on Catholic cosmology, complementing this with what I conceive of as 'social categories of understanding'. I will then present my ethnographic analyses of *faith* and *miracle* before offering my concluding thoughts.

Contextualizing Three Ethnographic Sites[2]

My ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in three different locations of the Brazilian Northeast region. In the state of Bahia, I worked in areas of Angüera and Monte Santo; and in the state of Pernambuco, I worked in a neighbourhood of Recife, the state's capital[3]. The first fieldwork site to which I will refer is the rural area of the small town of Angüera, which is located in the hot and sub-humid *agreste* region of Bahia. Here a local *vidente* (seer) has received visions of Our Lady for over twenty years. My second locus of study is the Sanctuary of the Holy Cross (*Santuário da Santa Cruz*), situated in the city of Monte Santo, in Bahia's backlands (*sertão*). Finally, my third ethnographic site is Casa Amarela, a neighbourhood in the coastal city of Recife, the capital of Pernambuco. In Casa Amarela, my focus has been on local Catholic rituals and representations of death. In presenting my case studies, I do not begin with the ethnographic context of Casa Amarela, where I first conducted research (1994-2010). My narrative instead follows the development of my ideas regarding faith and miracle: Angüera (1996-1997) to Monte Santo (2004-2007), both pilgrimage sites and loci of miracles, concluding with a return to my data from Casa Amarela. This intellectual path allowed me to understand more fully the phenomena in question.[4]

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1   I do not want to imply that a cosmological perspective belongs only to the Catholic realm, and much less so to only Brazilian Catholicism specifically. I also would like to point out that I do not take Brazilian Catholicism, or even any of its customary varieties, to be a homogenous entity. As I have amply discussed elsewhere (M. Reesink 2003a), I understand the field of Catholicism as consisting of a dialectical process between unity and plurality: a process that enables its members to build both identifications and diversities. Consequently, the same understanding will also be applied here to the concept of cosmology.

2   Due to the lack of space here, and the fact that this article aims to make a more analytical and comparative effort, the ethnographic descriptions had to be shortened. For a more detailed description, see: Reesink 2003b and 2005a (for Anguera); Reesink 2006 and 2013 (for Monte Santo); Reesink 2003a, 2009 and 2014 (for Casa Amarela-Recife).

3   Brazil is officially divided into five geographic regions: North, South, Northeast, Southeast and Centralwest; each region includes a certain number of political states. Bahia and Pernambuco are two of the nine states of the Northeast, the poorest region of Brazil. Here we find three main ecological and geographical zones: the term "agreste" describes the intermediate ecological zone stretching from Paraíba to Bahia, which is bordered on the east by what used to be the Atlantic coastal forests, and on the west by the semi-arid sertão, or backlands.

4   The research for this essay was conducted in the following periods: Angüera, 1996-1997 and 2007; Monte Santo, 2004-2007. From 1994 to the present, I have conducted a number of different research projects in Casa Amarela, with the most extended periods of fieldwork being 1994-1995, 1998-1999, and 2008-2010.

We turn first to Angüera. Here apparitions of Our Lady appear on a small cattle farm belonging to a fifteen-child family. One of the children, Pedro, who is known as the *vidente* (seer), figures prominently. In 1987, after a period of illness and tribulation, Pedro, then a teenager, received his first apparition of Our Lady. From that moment on, the Virgin informed him, he would regularly receive messages that he would be obligated to spread. Indeed, the *vidente* is transformed into a channel of communication between the 'two worlds'. Subsequently, the farm became a sanctuary and *locus* of pilgrimage and devotion to Our Lady of Angüera. Our Lady appears on Tuesday and Saturday nights. Before her appearance, the *vidente* always delivers a sermon, a moment of proselytizing, relaying innumerable messages left to him by the Virgin. This also serves as a moment during which both his legitimacy and the veracity of the apparitions are affirmed. This is, moreover, a preparatory ritual for both the *vidente* and the audience. Following the sermon is the recitation of the Holy Rosary and the Hail Holy Queen. Pedro then goes into a trance, at which time he receives Our Lady's messages by way of an image of her that only he can see (Reesink 2003b and 2005a).

When this first began, the vision of Our Lady happened every Saturday. After a few years this also started to happen every Tuesday. Angüera's fame began to spread and to attract hundreds of pilgrims at those apparitions' days. In the initial years, pilgrims came mostly from Salvador and small cities of Bahia, attracting also pilgrims from the state of Sergipe. Currently, the apparition is a known phenomenon throughout Brazil, in particular in the direction of the southeastern part of the country: they come to hear Our Lady's messages, passed along by way of the *vidente*. In this context, we can say that the *vidente* becomes the communicational channel between the supernatural (Our Lady) and the natural (the other persons, aiming, in fact, at the whole world) (Reesink, 2003b and 2005a). The *vidente* hence plays an indispensable role even when Our Lady is always thought to occupy the main and predominant role.

The city of Monte Santo arose at the base of the mountain housing the Sanctuary of the Holy Cross, a place that has been a pilgrimage site since the mid-eighteenth century.[5] Its micro-zone is currently known as "*Sertão de Canudos*", because this is where the War of Canudos took place (1895-1897).[6] The foundation of the sanctuary of Monte Santo was the work of Apolônio de Todi, a capuchin friar. During his stay in the area, contemplating the view, he thought the mountain looked like the mountain of the Holy Land, in Jerusalem. In a synecdochical action, he led the first procession to the mountain's summit: the first "miracle" happened during this ritual, an event that confirmed his intuition. For this reason, he renamed the mountain; originally called Piquaraçá, it is now Holy Mountain. From that moment on, the mountain has been sanctified and was transformed into a locus of peregrination, and source of countless miracles.

The Sanctuary of the Holy Cross refers to the whole mountain, at the summit of which sits the Church of the Holy Cross. Around (and across) this sanctified mountain two majors religious ceremonies developed: Holy Week, considered a local celebration, performed mainly by Monte Santo inhabitants, lasting eight days (from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday); and the Feast of All Saints (*Festa de Todos os Santos*), which is put on by thousands of pilgrims[7], on the first of November. To make the pilgrimage on the first of November,

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5   Within a Christian system, the development and establishment of cities by way of devotional and pilgrimage centres has been a recurrent pattern since Christianity's primordial beginnings (Brown 1981), in Europe as well as in other Christian and Western regions, as is the case in Brazil (Cavignac 1997).

6   The War of Canudos was a civil war between the Brazilian army and the followers of the religious layman Antônio Conselheiro whose religious fervor earned him the title of Counsellor. This leader, and the majority of Catholics, did not accept the authority of the recently instituted 'República Brasileira' and the consequent separation of the Catholic Church from the State. Originally Canudos was a small village pertaining to Monte Santo until growing considerably with the arrival and settlement of the Conselheiros. The movement created an autonomous area that did not recognize the legitimacy of the State, and an enormous campaign to extinguish the town followed. The town of Monte Santo was the republican army's headquarters. This event was romanticized by Vargas Llosa in his book *La Guerra del Fin del Mundo*. For a more anthropological discussion, see E. Reesink (2017).

7   The number of Monte Santo's inhabitants is estimated at around 50,000, the majority in its rural area (source: IBGE). During the Feast of All Saints the number of pilgrims and visitors can reach over 40,000 (according to Monte Santo's Council).

devotees climb the steep mountain to the church, a journey on foot that stretches for over more than three kilometres. Beginning at the chapel of souls (*capelinha das almas*), the path passes another twenty-three chapels before reaching the Church of the Holy Cross, thus representing the *via crucis*.

As such, Monte Santo is a historically Catholic place, not only in the sense that its population was at one time entirely Catholic – and is today still a strong a majority – but also because the Catholic Church has had a preponderant and significant role in the history and development of the city (Reesink 2006).

Finally, there is Casa Amarela, a neighbourhood in the city of Recife that is interesting not only because of its history (of fighting for land, relying heavily on the help of the progressive wing of the Catholic Church), but also because it is a large and populous neighbourhood separated into hilly areas inhabited primarily by working class groups, and flat areas which are home to middle class residents. I call my Catholic interlocutors who reside in the neighbourhood 'everyday Catholics', in the sense that while they call themselves Catholics, they do not necessarily constitute a specific or ideal Catholic 'type', vis-à-vis a would-be exceptionality (such as, for example, seers or pilgrims).

Consequently, I have focused on the 'movement' of the neighbourhood's Catholics, and their relation to this space. These Catholics tend to establish differences among themselves, not from the perspective of being real or nominal Catholics (a system of classification common among Brazilian social scientists). Baptism, after all, is the primary defining aspect of a Catholic identity. Rather, the differences these 'everyday Catholics' envision are based on *intensities* of Catholic ritual practice (Reesink 2003a).

What I call "intensities of ritual practice" refers to the amount of time and commitment that the Catholics engage in with regards to the Church rules and Catholic practices and rituals. Brazilian Catholics normally distinguish themselves from within two major groups: *praticante* (practicing) and *não-praticante* (non-practicing) Catholics; however, what defines a practicing or non-practicing Catholic can be differently conceived or understood by each person or community. The intensity of ritual practices can vary from just contemplating God's creation and performing only a prayer's *rythemes*[8] to attending Mass every Sunday, praying the Rosary every day and being actively engaged in the parishes' activities and the (regular and special) Catholic rituals that are organized.

Analysing comparatively these three different ethnographic contexts and experiences has allowed me to deepen my knowledge of Brazilian Catholic beliefs and practices. The comparison led me to understand the necessity of approaching Catholicism from a cosmological perspective, which, in turn, led me to comprehend *faith* and *miracle* as social categories of understanding that contribute significantly to organising the Catholic cosmology. Therefore, I consider that to better understand the why/what/how of Brazilian Catholicism, it is vitally important to take a cosmological approach and investigate its social categories of understanding.

Catholic Cosmology and Social Categories of Understanding

To discuss *faith* and *miracle* as categories in the Catholic context and to account for their complexity, it seems to me that we must comprehend the world in accordance with the cosmology of Catholic devotees (Reesink 2003a). By complexity, I am suggesting that the Catholicism conceived by my research subjects cannot be seen as a moment or space *in the* world or in society, but rather as a set of elements that constitute a world, their world. This makes it necessary to adopt a cosmological perspective of Catholicism, for the Catholic agents 'think' about this religion cosmologically[9]. It follows that the concept of 'cosmology' is not only of theoretical or

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8   This term adopts an analogy to Lévi-Strauss's concept of "*Mythème*", the smallest part of a myth. Accordingly, the "*rhytheme*" is the smallest part of a rite. Therefore, as I explain elsewhere (Reesink 2009), a prayer's *rhytheme* would be the minimal gesture that it takes to utter a few words from a prayer.

9   One could argue that it is neither new nor original to say that people think of Catholicism cosmologically. However, in the anthropology of Brazilian Catholicism, scholars seldom take this approach to understand its specific and/or general logic. Therefore, I put forth that to adopt a cosmological perspective in order to understand the way Brazilian Catholics think and practice their Catholicism still has originality in this context.

intellectual importance to my analysis, but also that its use gives us a pragmatic and methodological application enabling one to better grasp the world of the interlocutors.

In the first place, in a broad sense, I prefer to apply the concept 'cosmology' rather than that of 'religion', for it seems to me that using 'cosmology' is a viable way to resolve some of the problems pointed out by critics of the concept of 'religion' and its application (e.g. Asad 1983). In this sense, 'cosmology' encompasses 'religion' and the latter could be broadly analyzed within the scope of the former, which could also lead to cross-cultural analyses[10]. Last but not least, in my earlier analyses and mainly because I was applying the usual definition on 'religion', I found it difficult to understand certain Catholics contexts. One of the main issues with this concept is that, consciously or unconsciously, it introduces a rigid duality (or opposition) between the profane and the sacred realms. However, and despite the fact that the profane/sacred distinction is a native conception, in my fieldwork, they show a dialectical dynamism that seems to make and unmake the opposition/duality in a triadic process (nature, culture, supernatural): this is expressed in the relationships that occur at different times, in different spaces and, hence, in variable contexts of time-space. Furthermore, as I will discuss below, Catholicism in such contexts is also the natural law that constitutes the world and a historical/religious institution. Therefore, the use of 'religion' or other similar terms, e.g. 'transcendence'[11], does not really aid us in understanding this dynamic and logic. Through the methodological application of the concept of 'cosmology', it was (ironically) easier to see their complexity, and it also enabled me to discern a more original understanding of the kind of Catholicism that I came across in my fieldwork.

I should note, on the other hand, that no one should apply this concept without keeping in mind Viveiros de Castro's criticism about 'how utterly trivial any attempts are to establish functional consistencies or formal correspondences between morphology and cosmology or between institution and representation'. It is therefore 'essential to grasp the problematic sense of this cosmology and then try to account for the "fluid" character of the morphology' (1992: 2-3). The most interesting thing about his criticism is that it has a double effect: it is a warning not to take the concept for granted while also maintaining its utility and applicability (which, naturally, should be valid for any concept).

Hence, with regard to my specific ethnographic data, such a discussion engages concepts directly linked to the question of nature, culture, and the supernatural. Inscribed onto the logic of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Catholics clearly have, in Descola's (1992) terms, a 'naturalist' model of objectifying the world, implying the establishment of a dichotomy between nature and culture without being reduced to it. What interests us here is that if these Catholics think about the universe in terms of culture on the one hand and nature on the other, both are directly related to the supernatural. As such – and in a way quite different from that which Viveiros de Castro (1996) observes for Amerindian perspectivism – both nature and culture derive from the supernatural, suggesting that nature and culture both contain, in a latent form, aspects of this supernatural, which is in turn always in a hierarchically superior position to nature and culture, both of which are seen to 'exist' because of the supernatural (represented by God).[12] Given this situation, Catholicism would, for Catholics, be the best suited to express the nature-culture-supernatural relationship. Citing the words of one informant from Casa Amarela:

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10   In this article, however, I am narrowing down my analyses to compare only the data that I gathered during my fieldwork, and the conclusions arise from those data. It does not mean the analyses cannot be applied or compared more widely, only that it is not my aim to do this here.

11   Robbins (2011 and 2016) has an interesting take on the pair immanence-transcendence. However, although this seems to be a more neutral term than 'religion' (and in this way, attempting to respond to Asad's criticisms); it seems to me that this pair does not really solve the problem as far as my data is concerned. Maybe this is less problematic, or even unproblematic, in contexts like those of Protestantism, but at least in relation to my data, the problem remains. It follows that the concept of 'cosmology' remains the least problematical and most useful to what follows.

12   Which, as Lindquist suggests for the Siberian case, presents itself with an ontological nature (Lindquist 2008); moreover, as Mitchell and Mitchell (2008) note, this nature would also be immanent. For a further and more extended discussion about the notion of "God" in the context of my interlocutors, see Reesink 2005b.

The Catholic religion is this: it's not a religion, it is a religion, it's because it's the history of the world, right? It's the history of the beginning of the world, the time of Adam, also stuff that no one ever saw, right? No one saw it, right? But it's in books, it's written, no one saw except for whoever wrote it, right? So that's what the Catholic religion is; it's the history of the world, of the beginning of the world, right? And these others were invented afterwards. This is why I say I'm Catholic; it's not that I live at church, no way! ... I know that to believe God exists, to believe that there is a supreme power you don't need anything. It's enough to see a mango tree like this.... The Catholic that I'm talking about is exactly what I've said; it's a family tradition (Joel, Casa Amarela).

In this context, the Catholic religion, or 'Catholic law', as it is commonly called, was instituted by God at the creation 'of the beginning of the world', and thus would be inscribed in the world, in nature. Put otherwise, the natural world would comprise not only physical laws, but also moral ones represented by 'Catholic law'. But there is a more profound implication. It also serves to make Christian morality – or more precisely Catholic morality – universally legitimate, since this type of morality is viewed as intrinsic to nature itself. Here we find, if not a 'socialization' of nature, at least its moralization, for it would have both 'physical laws' and 'moral laws', the latter being, as already noted, Catholicism itself. But I repeat: both laws are supernatural creations, the product of God, and thus retain an aspect of the supernatural. Still, as I perceived through innumerable conversations with Catholics, if Catholicism is a naturalised morality/religion, it is also culture. In this sense, a human dimension is revealed in its 'history', above all else in the errors – the result of human fallibility – committed over the course of this long history. This suggests that Catholicism is viewed as having a natural dimension (a moral law inscribed in nature) and a cultural dimension (a product of human history, the institution) (Reesink 2003a). We can thus interpret culture as a representation of the possibility of error, of failure, of being human, while nature would represent the absolute, the immutable, and the ineluctable. Catholicism, as a supernatural creation, would simultaneously belong to both nature and culture[13].

The discussion here about nature and culture is vital particularly if we consider a third dimension, that of the supernatural. The terms nature-culture-supernatural are categories that belong to the worldview of my interlocutors, even if they do not always explicitly and consciously conceptualize them[14]. Therefore, their importance proves particularly true in the case of the Catholics involved here, since for the native exegesis itself, the supernatural is the foundation of culture and nature, while simultaneously presenting itself as external to both. The categories of *faith* and *miracle* need to be considered within this frame, for they express the possibility of establishing an intersection/mediation of these three dimensions.

For this, I propose that within the Catholic context, these two terms be treated analytically as 'social categories of understanding'. Consequently, here I utilize the Maussian conception that social categories of understanding are historically and culturally conditioned. He explains, 'categories live and die with people and their diverse contributions' (Mauss 1969: 150). But this does not prevent Mauss from generalizing. Therefore, it is necessary to think of a dialectic relationship between 'human cognitive processes' and specific cultural conceptions that 'also introduce a set of rules governing the use and the appropriation of nature, evaluations of technical systems, and beliefs about the structure of the cosmos, the hierarchy of beings, and the very principles by which living things function' (Descola 1992: 110). In the same way, and in a sense analogous to Descola's (1992) argument, I consider *faith* and *miracle* – in the Catholic context under investigation – to be 'elementary categories' that dialectically 'structure social life to organize, in conceptual terms, relations' (Descola 1992: 114) between people, nature, and the supernatural.

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13   For other different and interesting discussions about the idea of 'culture' in relation to the religious realm, see Mafra (2011) and Giumbelli (2008). However, the authors discuss other contexts and a different kind of problematic.

14   Their contents – and its possible variations – are very much rooted in the traditional Christian-western perspective (as discussed, e.g., by Viveiros de Castro 1996).

Yet as Mauss insists, before proceeding with an investigation of the general character of categories, it is first necessary 'to research each category's shape to make conclusions thereafter about the general character of each' (Mauss 1969: 128). It is important to note that for Mauss, the initial research of these forms entails, first and foremost, ethnographic analysis. In Toren, we find this same preoccupation with ethnography, though in a more elaborate form. Indeed, in discussing Fijian categories, Toren affirms that these "show why, according to an anthropological perspective, a category's meaning cannot be presumed; they demonstrate why an ethnographic investigation must always determine in what way a category is used as well as its possible implications' (Toren 2006: 452). One might therefore say that categories must also be understood as categories of the real. In addition to this, or perhaps because of it, thinking about these categories is nevertheless akin to considering, in a reworked fashion, the position of Lévy-Bruhl (1949) upon detecting the existence of an affective dimension of concepts and, in this way, comprehending the categories that refer to the 'mystical' dimension of 'affective categories of the supernatural'. However, instead of thinking along the same lines as Lévy-Bruhl in considering the content of affectivity as something specific to categories of an aspect or of different types of societies[15], it is important to adopt the viewpoint that these categories, particularly those understood ethnographically (in any type of society), are constituted also by affectivity, which 'would materialize', as Lévy-Bruhl himself notes, in its symbols, allowing the comprehension of their subjective meanings. Furthermore, it seems to me that the greater adherence to these social categories of understanding (or even their greater plausibility) among natives is due precisely to the fact that they are also affectively constituted.

With this as our point of departure, I consider the categories of *faith* and *miracle* in the articulation between the native and anthropological perspectives. And indeed this articulation has a pronounced influence on the very process by which I construct my reflections. As such, the meanings and practices related to the category of *miracle* are much more 'visible' and comprehensible in the field, moving me initially to take this category as the most immediate. Therefore, influenced by this more obvious 'visibility', in my earlier analysis of the pilgrimage site of Angüera (Reesink 2005a), I considered *faith* to be an aspect of what I called the *Regime of Miracles*. In my original discussion, I pointed out that from 'the establishment of the *Regime of Miracles* (where cure, grace, blessing, signs and apparitions are its main components), we could infer some fundamental relations: sacralisation and protection, faith and proof, pleading and help. Furthermore, we can also say that it comprises the process of communication, reciprocity and alliance between the pilgrims and the Virgin Mary (Reesink 2005a:14). Yet, given the degree to which the category of *faith* became more diversified when introduced in new contexts of investigation, it proved to be increasingly broad. Consequently, today I think that these two categories are better interpreted as constituting the dialectical order of the Catholic cosmological system[16]. The dialectic process occurs asymmetrically, such that *faith* reveals itself as a category encompassing and containing the category of *miracle*, the latter seeming to exist or be constituted only by way of *faith*. This finding proved increasingly accurate as I compared the two ethnographic contexts of Angüera and Monte Santo (centres of pilgrimage and miracle) with the data from Casa Amarela, in which the Catholics' ordinary lives were not completely focused on the prominence or urgency of miracles, precisely because the focus was on ordinary daily life. However, the potential for miracles remained. The logical consequence is the perception

15   One could argue that Lévi-Bruhl did not limit the 'affective categories of the supernatural' to 'primitive' societies. However, from my interpretation of Lévi-Bruhl's work, he did posit it explicitly within the 'primitive logic'. That said, I would not say that for this author there were no 'affective categories' at all amongst other kind of societies. On the other hand, from what I know, he never discussed this idea in these terms related to the latter.

16   This does not mean that only these two categories are present in the social ordering of the cosmological system, or that faith is always the most significant or most encompassing. Rather, this is the case in the specific ethnographic context discussed here and according to the perspective adopted here.

of a category that is perennial (*faith*), and another which is latent, yet always present, but appearing only intermittently (*miracle*). Yet when the second, extraordinary, category emerges, it dialectically contributes to the first[17].

Faith and Miracle

As already noted, in anthropological work on Catholicism, few scholars treat *faith* as a 'social category' central to organizing and justifying the actions of Catholic devotees.[18] But to comprehend Catholic practices and representations, it is necessary to emphasize that *faith* emerges as a fundamental category to solidifying both Catholic performances and the actual structure of the cosmological system. Ethnographically speaking, the category of *faith* appears as a result of three meanings and/or uses: the first, and the least analytically complex, is *faith* as a synonym of *religion*. Thus, informants often speak about 'my faith, which is Catholicism', 'those who have a Catholic faith', or 'those who belong to the Catholic faith'. The second meaning of *faith*, and perhaps the most interesting, is as belief and a link to proof, doubt, and assurance; this appears most explicitly in *faith's* dialectic with *miracle*. The third meaning of *faith* is as a human condition.

Faith as belief – particularly in a sense of believing in the existence of the supernatural and of the imposition of the supernatural on nature – seems to be the meaning that is most 'talked about'. Paradoxically, though, this meaning of *faith* often remains the least critically examined, as the specialized literature often limits it exclusively to 'belief'.[19] It seems to me, however, that the meaning of *faith-belief* necessarily includes qualities not always implicated in *belief*.[20] One such quality is the relationship of trust and affectivity (Maynard 1993; Reesink 2003a) that is established, for instance, between devotees and the Holy Cross; between Our Lady of Angüera and her followers; between the Catholics of Casa Amarela and their "special dead" (Reesink 2003a); between the Catholics of these contexts and Christian divinity, for as Mariluce, from Casa Amarela, puts it, '[Faith] is trust in God'.

Regarding the term *belief*, Toren (2006), in her analysis of Fijian 'mana', makes an interesting distinction between 'believing' and 'knowing'. She argues that 'we can end up characterizing as *belief* that which our informants *know*' (2006: 449). Even if a difference in the degree of certainty between belief (relative) and knowing (absolute) truly exists, it seems to me that the category of *faith* in the Catholic cosmological system contains both a relative certainty (translatable as belief) and an absolute certainty (knowing). Thus Catholics know that God exists and believe in the possibility of miracles, but they do not know if a specific miracle took place. Regardless, it is most common to treat belief as synonymous with knowing.

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17   Despite this change in seeing a more fundamental role for the category of *faith*, I still think it is more interesting to maintain the *Regime of Miracles* concept, precisely because of its ethnographical visibility.

18   Primarily vis-à-vis ritual situations in which sacrifice, and mainly that which implies physical suffering, presents itself as the visible dimension and therefore performed according to the logic of the *Regime of Miracles*.

19   Generally speaking, in the majority of known studies (ex. Mitchell and Mitchell 2008) belief and faith seem to be presented simply as interchangeable terms; however, in other contexts, such as among the Pentecostals of Ecuador, belief is inferior to faith (Maynard 1993: 253). The distinction between faith and belief – seemingly rooted in the distinction between greater reflexivity (reason) and greater commitment (affectivity) – also appears to be at the heart of Balzer's (2008) analyses in Siberia and of Swatowiski's (2007) thoughts on Brazilian Pentecostals. The fact that the interpretations of these authors in their respective contexts are pertinent, comparatively, to my own ethnographic research context demonstrates that the difference and hierarchisation between faith and belief – given that the former is typically better explained by natives than the latter – make sense for a view of faith as a social category of understanding, as has been discussed here. This view not only accounts for diversity of context, but also for feelings, performances, emotions, and differentiated characterisations raised by the natives themselves.

20   Lindquist and Coleman question the applicability – or the problems and virtues – of employing the term 'belief' in the anthropological analysis of religious phenomena, concluding that: 'in writing "against belief" we cannot hope – or even wish – to remove it from our analytical lexicon forever. We can try, however, to show the value of writing "against", rather than "with", the term' (Lindquist and Coleman 2008: 15). From this we can extract a 'near' analytic-ethnographic impossibility of it being subtracted from the category 'belief'. At the same time, one would not expect anthropologists to take such a fact for granted, expecting them instead to relativise and condition it analytically and ethnographically.

But if *faith-belief* implies a distinction (at least in analytical terms) between belief and knowing, it also implies doubt and scepticism. Put differently, the category of faith exists at the articulation of doubt-belief-knowing, in which proof plays an extremely relevant role. A few anthropologists have already addressed the issue of doubt in the construction of belief. Pouillon (1979) has emphasized that doubt is inherent in belief. Yet it has only been of late, primarily in the works of Severi (2002), Hojbjerg (2002), and Whitehouse (2002), that doubt has begun to occupy a more central role in the study of religion. Indeed, doubt pertains to what these authors call religious reflexivity, in the sense that when subjects reflect on their beliefs and practices, doubt and scepticism are vital aspects of this reflexive process even if in the end (as is typical) the reflection serves merely to confirm the belief.[21] At any rate, this religious reflexivity largely depends on the absence, or conversely, the existence, of *proof*; it is dependent on effectiveness. Therefore, when I speak of the relationship of trust between devotees and saints, it is important to understand that this trust is based on something quite palpable and concrete: *proof*. For one to have faith, examples are needed, *ex-votos* (votive offering) are needed, a demonstration of sacrifice is needed (for this is also revealed in miracles).[22] For Catholics the *proof* resides in the *faith-belief*.

> - Do you know of any miracles? (M. Reesink)
>
> - Ah! There are many miracles here. People who arrive with a broken leg and leave healed; they make a vow...You go around there [He points toward the room of the ex-votos] and you're going to see all these legs, arms, photos, cloth dolls. Everything is there, the stuff of the vows that people make, and they get well. There are people who come from far away, make a vow, receive the grace, so they owe. (Evandro, Monte Santo, resident)

Thus the occurrence of a miracle demonstrates or proves its 'realness' to the devotees. At the same time, though, these concrete examples confirm and legitimate, for Catholics, the existence of miracles. It is not uncommon, therefore, for pilgrims in Angüera or Monte Santo to express doubt regarding the existence of miracles, saying things such as 'they say miracles happen, I don't know because I've never seen them'. The doubt expressed here does not concern the cosmological system itself. Rather it is doubt about the real capacity of miracle production in that particular sanctuary or in relation to that specific apparition. This furthermore reveals the idea that the proof, or evidence, involves the senses. Of all our senses, vision, as Bloch (2008) notes, seems to permit the greatest recognition of truth, or even of knowing. The prominence of vision can be observed in common expressions such as 'I'll only believe it if I see it' or 'I saw the miracle happen before my very own eyes'. But vision is not the only source of validity or means of proving a miracle. Indeed, proof can also exist in emotions, experiences that may not necessarily be objectively demonstrable, accounts given by people considered reliable, and the sacrifices made by others. Everything can serve as proof of a supernatural action. Perhaps, then, the overriding quality of faith-belief is its capacity to offer proofs that are not necessarily objectifiable in a purely cognitive way, but are subject to the senses, emotions, and experiences of the faithful. And it is in the interplay of belief-doubt-proof that the relationships of reciprocity are established between Catholics and the supernatural, according to which some give while others receive and reciprocate.

Here I would like to utilize the category of *faith* to explore further the issue of receiving and reciprocating. In the ethnographic context of the Sanctuary of the Holy Cross an extremely relevant issue emerged that seems to me akin to a double movement of faith. The first movement is the primary and most frequently and easily

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21   As discussed elsewhere (Reesink 2010), there are two levels of doubt: the broadest is that which puts into check the whole cosmological system and which can lead to a person's conversion to another system; the other is a doubt that questions very specific aspects or even the efficacy of certain rites within the cosmological system, without putting the system itself into 'doubt'. See also Haynes (2019) for an interesting discussion about 'doubt' in a different context.

22   This is distinct from that which occurs in the Ecuadorian Pentecostal context (Maynard 1993), and, possibly, in the Protestant context more generally, in which there appears to be a reduction in the importance of miracles and proof vis-à-vis faith. It would be interesting to discuss more about Pentecostalism, but I don't have the space to do so here. For a good discussion of this kind, see Birman (2012).

noticed, which is the need to have the faith to be able to receive miracles. This is clear in the response given to me by one city resident when I asked her if miracles occurred in Monte Santo.

I think they exist, because people wouldn't come otherwise… And lots of people do things, they take wooden legs to the Holy Cross, they take arms, they take hair and everyone who does it is blessed. It also depends on faith; you can't get anything without faith. (Ivone, Monte Santo, resident).

The second movement of faith appears above all else in regards to pilgrims dealing with the obligatory reciprocation of that which was obtained by way of the Holy Cross; this retribution is made through corporeal sacrifice, the realization of which seems to be predicated fundamentally on faith.

They went back home because they couldn't handle it, they ran out of breath, they got tired, and went home… I was feeling tired too, I stopped, had a popsicle, I think it was so much faith, it gave me courage, so I made the climb, thank God. (Mônica, Monte Santo, pilgrim).

They come to thank Him [God] in many different ways. They come on their knees, they come…. The people go around on their knees; it is great faith. Since when a person does this, climbs up on their knees, it's because the person has a lot of faith. (Heloísa, Monte Santo, pilgrim).

- But do you believe it happens? (M. Reesink)

- I do believe it, you know? Going up this thing is no joke, it must be tremendous faith for us to go up it, then come down… I think it happens. (Vânia, Monte Santo, pilgrim).

In these words, it is clear that faith is necessary to fulfil a vow. Indeed, the sentiment is especially vivid in this case – as the pilgrims seemed unanimously to affirm – given the actual geological formation of the Sanctuary of the Holy Cross. With a steep climb stretching over three kilometres, the pilgrimage requires a truly great physical effort, above all in the case of women and elderly men, but also for younger individuals not physically prepared for the climb. There are countless stories of people falling ill, of people who take hours to make the climb due to the difficulties, or of people forced to abandon their objective of reaching the main chapel at the summit. Consequently, for a significant majority of the pilgrims, simply being able to make the climb up the mountain represents a superhuman feat, indicating, in other words, that such an act would be impossible without supernatural intervention. Here we once again find that faith is a prerequisite to being blessed with this miracle.

God blessed me, because I made the climb. We go up and it's like God gives us the strength, you know? Because oh my goodness [*Ave Maria*]! (Amara, Monte Santo, pilgrim).

We aren't the ones going up, it's God who gives us the strength to go up. If it were just flesh, a natural strength, people wouldn't make it all the way. I think God gives us the strength to go up. (Leonardo, Monte Santo, pilgrim).

I encountered two little old ladies, and I don't know how they come and go, I have no idea how they do it, it could only be a miracle! (Miro, Monte Santo, pilgrim).

In this way, faith in both God and the Holy Cross make it possible to receive the miracle, which requires reciprocation. But the reciprocity itself is rearticulated as a supernatural occurrence since the devotee acts with complete faith. In this context, the reciprocation of the miracle is only possible by way of supernatural intervention, which would imply that people are completely powerless, and that they thus serve as a means of expressing the power of the supernatural. However, looking at this from another angle, it might be argued

that, in the end, this entire cosmological system actually depends on people, for it is only through human faith that it can be put into motion in the first place.

We now arrive at the ideal moment for a critical analysis of the category of *miracle*, an inevitable aspect of the meaning of *faith-belief*, as should be clear by now. In ethnographic studies on Catholicism, and particularly regarding Brazilian Catholicism, the category of *miracle* has received greater anthropological attention than that of *faith*. This may be due in part to its greater visibility, which may therefore more easily arouse ethnographic interest[23]. And although researchers have discussed the issue at some length, the category has not always been utilized as a means of analysis and comprehension. For example, Shanafelt (2004) has proposed that the Latin term *mirabilus* replace its Latin synonym *miraculum* in anthropological analyses. According to the author, the term 'marvellous' would be advantageous as it is less closely linked to monotheistic presumptions and would thus be more 'universalizable' than 'miracle' in dealing with events considered extraordinary. As such, 'marvellous' would encompass both the 'magical' and the 'miraculous'. Despite Shanafelt's interesting rationale, I believe that in the Brazilian context, although the term marvellous is indeed linked to an idea of that which is 'unusual' (ex. *cidade maravilhosa*, or marvellous city, as is Rio de Janeiro's moniker), it does not necessarily imply anything supernatural or anything related to the supernatural.[24] Consequently, the broader and more ethnographically inclusive term, for the current context at least, is surely *miracle*.

In one of the first ethnographic works to conceptualize *miracle* in the context of Brazilian Catholicism, Zaluar (1983) asserts that in characterizing a miracle, 'one cannot attribute the fact to any other cause except divine intervention, since its course or development is *uncontrollable*' (1983: 100). This suggests that nature is separate from the supernatural such that nature is within the human domain and the supernatural within that of the divine. Here a *miracle* would be the act of the supernatural intervening in the natural for the good of the 'men of God' (Zaluar 1983), and largely at their request. Sallnow (1987: 54-55) has also sought to conceptualize *miracle*, but from the Andean point of view. The author suggests that miraculous phenomena would first be classified as 'mystical theophany', which is the apparition of an image; afterwards, a divinity's 'active thaumaturgy' would lead to the entrance of cures, successes, etc. Still, neither Zaluar nor Sallnow make any classificatory and/or qualitative distinction between *miracle* and other terms such as *grace* or *blessing*.

We find this distinction, however, in Minayo (1994). The author classifies *cure*, *miracle*, *grace*, and *blessing* in a hierarchy according to research conducted in a Catholic sanctuary in Brazil. For her, *cure* in this context 'refers to the phenomenon by which people recuperate their physical and mental health' (1994: 66), or even their safety and well-being; *miracle* 'is reserved to designate the obtaining of a good (health, or a material or spiritual good)' (1994: 66) which could not be 'naturally' attained; *grace* 'is used to explain situations of cure' (1994: 66); *blessing* would be 'a preventative act against evil, against adversarial forces' (1994: 66). While certainly interesting, these classifications reveal differentiated degrees of overlapping. They reveal much more than a mere complication in establishing definitions or an ambiguity in the native discourse, according to which 'miracles are called graces or blessings, just as graces are classified hyperbolically as miracles' (1994: 66). Indeed, this seems to suggest an equivalence of terms, according to which miracle is the term that is always (or nearly always) utilized as equivalent or synonymous with the others.

In this sense, when I began to study pilgrimage sites, my idea was to apply Minayo's elaboration of 'miracle', 'cure', 'grace' and 'blessing' as relational, but autonomous, categories in order to understand the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the facts and data I found through my fieldwork did not quite fit her model. The Catholics in my fieldwork always – or nearly always – apply the word *miracle* as equivalent to or synonymous with 'cure', 'grace'

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23   For an extended historical analysis of the development of the concept of miracle, see Goodich (2016).

24   It seems, however, that *marvellous* and *miraculous* are not distinct from each other only in the Brazilian case, for even Hume positioned miracle above marvellous (1996: 114).

and 'blessing'[25]: they interchange them (miracle-cure/ miracle-grace/ miracle-blessing) to describe or analyse a particular miraculous event; this appears to introduce a sort of ambiguity and ambivalence regarding the term 'miracle' in its relation to the others[26], for it would seem to express difference and sameness at the same time. However, it seems to me (then and now) that we have a larger category, that of *miracle*, and it encompasses all of these other categories. Therefore *cure*, *grace*, and *blessing* are but aspects or types of *miracle*, for a *miracle* would itself be the intervention of the supernatural into the natural while *cure*, *grace*, and *blessing* would be the results of such an intervention. The equivalences and ambivalences between miracle and cure, miracle and grace, miracle and blessing would be nothing more than the exposition of a relationship of the parts to their whole in the establishment of a synecdoche. Taking this approach allowed me to better understand the data and the way these people conceived their world[27].

My data provide yet another source of reflexion that also reinforces my approach. In addition to *cure/grace/blessing*, the category of miracle also comprises other elements, specifically *signs* (and/or *stigmata*) and *apparitions*. *Signs* are among the most recurrent phenomena in the hagiographies and accounts analyzed by social scientists (see, for example, Cavignac 1997; Blanc 1995; Brown 1981). These can appear on human bodies (as *stigmata*) or in the environment. *Signs* are characterized by the supernatural transformation of nature, often translated as the inversion of the natural, as many informants recount in Angüera (for instance, daylight at night or darkness during the day). *Signs* are, as the word itself indicates, 'signs' of supernatural presence, serving to verify and legitimise[28]. They are, furthermore, proof of the holiness of a locale, a phenomenon, or an individual involved in a process of sanctification.[29] As for *apparitions*, scholars generally classify these as phenomena distinct from *miracles*. This is the case for Turner and Turner (1978), as well as for Davis and Boles (2003). For the Turners, in the Christian – specifically Catholic – model, the divine power is manifested by way of 'revelation, miracles, prophecy, and apparitions' (Turner and Turner 1978: 205). In other words, apparitions are in a separate category. But, still in dialogue with these authors, one could argue that in fact *apparitions* are extraordinary occurrences that emerge in the quotidian and natural human world. In this and many other ways, apparitions are miraculous occurrences, for they are the result of the intervention of the supernatural in nature, as is asserted in Angüera by devotees of Our Lady. In Angüera, therefore, the locale of pilgrimages and of apparitions of Our Lady is protected and prepared by God, as a privileged place 'where the contrasted poles of Heaven and Earth met' (Brown 1981:3), or as the *vidente* (seer) puts it:

This is a holy ground that God chose and where He erected a cross so that the Mother of Jesus, before this cross, could transmit her message. (Pedro, the *Vidente*, Angüera)

And this is why it is a permanent (and potential) source of miracles, however this may be configured.

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25   It does not follow that there is no hierarchy between these types of miracles: the cure has the greatest value and is also the more difficult to "receive", while a blessing is of minor importance. We could say that the more extraordinary the miracle (cure, apparitions) the greater its value; the less extraordinary the miracle (grace, blessing), the less relative value attributed to it.

26   It is important to note that I have seldom seen or heard anyone doing the same with the others terms: they rarely used grace-blessing, grace-cure or blessing-cure as equivalents to describe or analyse the same event.

27   This argument is extensively developed in M. Reesink 2005a. Once again, unfortunately, in order to present the central argument of the current paper, lack of space does not allow for some important concepts like 'sacrifice' to be discussed in detail.

28   I would like to stress that signs ("sinais") is an emic concept/category from my different fieldwork projects, which refers to the materialization of the supernatural in the natural world. Their content primarily refers to the supernatural actions that invert the laws of physics. As any kind of miracle, they can also be used or seen as a kind of proof of the supernatural interference/existence. For an interesting discussion about religious materialization, see Keane (2008).

29   In hagiographies the presence of stigmas on the bodies of those in the process of sanctification is always a recurring presence. See Albert (1992) and, in the case of modernity, see Blanc (1995).

Deliver it to her and that's it, you forget your problems, debts, illness, it's in Mary's hands. I am sure that the miracle will happen in your life, for God is powerful and Our Lady is the powerful mother of Jesus, who will take our request to Christ. (Pedro, the *Vidente*, Angüera)

So I said it like this: 'it's Angüera, my prayers in Angüera'. (Andrea, Angüera, pilgrim)

In this way, the perspective that should be adopted treats miracle not just as a 'simple' exceptional occurrence. Rather, it should be conceptualized as a social category of understanding that classifies, justifies, and encompasses all of these occurrences, which are actions and revelations of the supernatural, organizing and explaining the nature-culture-supernatural relationship. It seems plausible to view miracle as this type of category only if we also consider it as ethnographically constituted by way of a kind of hybridism, or syncretism, that my informants construct: everything happens as if they put together Hume's and St. Augustine's seemingly contradictory conceptualizations of miracle, which, put metaphorically, are 'science' and 'religion'[30]. Hume insisted that '*miracle* is a violation of the *laws* of nature' (1996:114) while St. Augustine rhetorically asked, 'For how is that contrary to nature which happens by the will of God, since the will of so mighty a Creator is certainly the nature of each created thing? A portent, therefore, happens not contrary to nature, but contrary to what we know as nature' (1996: 240).[31] This hybridism seems to legitimate the cosmological conception of a Catholicism that participates in nature, and not just as 'culture'. More important still, it seems to be precisely because of *miracle's* capacity to be simultaneously *contra natura* and *intra natura* that allows it to serve as a native social category, subject to, and utilized alongside, the category of *faith*, at the intersection or mediation of supernatural-nature-culture, as discussed above.

In this way, we find a broad category, *miracle*, composed of various parts or qualities (cures, graces, blessings, signs, apparitions) that are not mutually exclusive. Rather they are complementary, even if such complementarity does not annul the autonomous capacity of each of the parts, allowing them to appear together or separately. In Angüera, we see a synchronicity among these qualities of miracle such that apparitions, signs, cures, graces, and blessings occur contemporaneously. In the ethnographic case of Monte Santo, what we see is the diachronic presence of all of the elements of the category of miracle acting with differing degrees of intensity at different times: signs (a windstorm) and apparitions (the most recurrent being that of Our Lady, indicating her chapel's location) are said to have materialized at the time of the 'discovery' of the mountain as a holy source. These signs and apparitions served to authenticate and spatially organize the sanctuary; and these events were succeeded by a period of numerous graces, blessings, and cures, all of which still continue today.

The Human Condition

The third meaning, or utility, of *faith* is that which refers to the human condition, or more specifically, that which is conceptualized as an aspect or quality of the notion of the Catholic person (Reesink 2014), but which only makes sense for natives since faith as an aspect or quality of the human comprises faith as belief. This meaning/use of the category of *faith* became more evident to me in relation to the representations Catholics established in reference to God, to the dead, and to the 'other world'. From this, I noted that the construction of the notion of the Catholic person is intimately linked to the notion of God: the idea of the human person derives from the conception of the Catholic-Christian divine (Reesink 2005b). Thus if the Catholic person has components that are 'whole', such as the body and spirit, other aspects vary in their intensity and quality

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30   In which, obviously, Humes would represent 'science' and St. Augustin 'religion'.

31   This hybridism only appears to be possible by discarding the logical conclusion of Hume's entire argument, which denies the possibility of a miracle. As Pannenberg affirms, in Hume, 'The concept of miracle as a violation of natural law subverts the very concept of law and exposes the futility of the assertion of miracles' (2002: 759).

(Reesink 2003a). This characterizes love; this characterizes *faith*. As such, faith – or the capacity to have faith – is perceived as an element central to the human person, as a condition or capacity directly connected, as has already been mentioned, to a superior being linked to the supernatural.

> It's to be sure about God, faith comes from deep inside. I think it comes straight from God. He created us so it definitely comes from Him. (Viviane, Casa Amarela).

> Thus subjects are complete as humans because they have faith in God.

This explains why my informants refuse to acknowledge atheists as truly human, frequently referring to them instead as 'beasts' or 'animals', in a view I call 'radical'.

> To me they aren't even people, they're atheists [laughter]. To me they're atheists, because who would live in the world without God? Because we just live, why? Because of God! And if God didn't want it this way, there would be nobody, no one would live in the world. So there you go! And these who don't believe, who don't believe God is in the sky, or on the earth, aren't people, they're animals, atheists! (Lemos, Casa Amarela).

> I think it's a huge aberration, don't you think, sister[32]? Because who doesn't believe in God, really, really, it'd be better not to have ever even come to earth, my child. Because life only exists with God, everything only with God. Truthfully, people who don't have faith in God, don't have anything in life, it's a big hole. Everything only with God, without God we're nothing, and we have nothing, we're nothing, everything is with God. It's a tremendous aberration to be atheist, truly. (Carlos, Casa Amarela).

According to this perspective, by denying God and His existence, the atheist tears him-/herself away from humanity, from the very possibility of existence. This decision is viewed as akin to a rejection of humanity. We might even venture to say that, in this context, humanity is fixed to culture such that a person secures his/her human condition by a capacity to have faith, a capacity granted by God. In this way, a person without faith is part of nature; the person is a beast, a non-human. Furthermore, an atheist is an aberration, as Carlos put it, a monster in the world. After all, the 'essence' of humanity is linked to a faith in Christian divinity, for here humans *are* in God: to deny the supernatural is to deny the human being and is thus to present oneself as a monster, and in a situation such as this, it would be better simply not to exist. The atheists' lack of faith in the supernatural implies another dehumanizing metonym, as I was told by Tereza, from Casa Amarela: an atheist is lower than an animal, something resembling a rock, belonging, in other words, to inanimate nature: no life, no existence, nothing.[33]

Still others believe that if a person cut off from God is not just a beast, a thing, a monster, or simply nothing, it is because he/she aligns him-/herself with pure evil.

> These people who don't believe in God, these people are already dead in my eyes, right? For me, they don't have a spirit, they don't have a soul, because without believing in God you can't live… Because anyone who claims not to believe, I feel, is a child of the devil himself. (Ana, Casa Amarela).

From this viewpoint, if a person rejects the Christian divine, he/she falls inevitably into the hands of the devil, of evil: the person becomes the child of the devil himself, for here he/she is either in the 'kingdom' or in

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32   Carlos was one of my best informants. One of his objectives was to convert me to Catholicism, so he made it a point to include me in the activities of the lay Catholic community (of which he was one of the leaders), thus situating me within the community itself. One of the ways he included me was by calling me 'sister'.

33   The term 'atheist' is in itself negative: if some informants utilize it to designate a fact, others utilize it to express the fact itself, thus turning 'atheist' into a profanity, an offence.

the 'other world'. Furthermore, atheists are a source of fear and distrust, for they leave the world of humans/God to broach the world of the animals/devil, acknowledging that this entity is linked to the world of savages, animals, and, worst of all, to the undomesticated supernatural (Reesink 2003a, 2005b).[34]

While this 'radical' approach places the atheist in nature, distant from humanity, there is yet another possible approach, which I call the 'distrust paradox' which sees a lack of faith in God as entirely impossible.

> I think they [atheists] are totally wrong, and that deep down they actually do believe, because there isn't anyone who doesn't believe in God, right? (Lucas, Casa Amarela).

> There are those who say: 'I'm atheist, thank God!' So by accident, right? There is always the moment when we know that God has a hand in everything. Why would I believe someone who denies the existence of God? Don't you think, Mísia? There's always something. (Hilda, Casa Amarela).

These discourses demonstrate, first and foremost, impossibility: a person cannot be a non-human, but to be human, the person must believe-have faith in Christ's divinity, for it is He who allows for the conditions of humanity. Therefore, the affirmation, 'he has to believe!' or, as Lucas clearly stated, there are no people who do not believe. From this it follows that one who confesses his/her incredulity is viewed as crazy or offensive, or as someone who wants to stand out, a drifter, a pity case, or quite simply a liar. This is because in this ethnographic context, it is impossible – even unthinkable – that a *person* would exist without faith in God. And this is the paradox of the atheist: he or she is a person who has no faith in God; yet it is necessary to believe in Christian divinity to be a person. The existence of an atheist thus becomes a source of distrust, for he or she is a person who, to be a person at all, must be/believe *in* God. It is for this reason, then, that the majority of the informants exhibit an incredulity regarding what atheists say. Even among those (few) informants who do not show a distrust of atheists, atheists are seen as resulting from a 'blindness' or even a 'misguided search' for God. It is hardly surprising to suggest, then, that for these Catholics, human-without-God is truly unimaginable.

I now return to yet another issue. As already noted, it seems that the capacity to have faith, indeed faith in and of itself, can be increased or decreased over an individual's lifetime: it is thus necessary 'to practice' faith in order to preserve it intact and, by extension, to preserve one's own humanity.

> Of course you need to have faith! Without faith we can't get anywhere, right?! And it has to be a daily faith, there, every day. With courage and faith, you can't get discouraged, no way. Look, I'm over 60 years old and I've never lost my faith, here I am, with courage as long as God wills it. (Marlene, Casa Amarela)

> Exercising faith is something human beings must do. (Marcos, Casa Amarela).

This is why saying that 'one must have faith' to receive miracles demonstrates the characteristic of faith as an element that 'fluctuates' in quantity and intensity. However, in order to have sufficient faith or not, for example, to request or receive a miracle, does not deny the primary condition of Christian-Catholic divinity. Thus we are left with the notion that being human is linked to one's capacity to exercise faith, and this is always related to the supernatural: to exercise faith implies an increased intensity of faith in the supernatural. It is further worth emphasizing that practice, in this case, is the primary means by which to augment the specific quality of the Catholic human person. But the practice of faith is still a 'complete' performance, including not only aspects that are physical (i.e., the body), but also those which are cognitive and affective.

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34 According to Muchembled, in the process of constructing the image of Satan, there was a concerted effort to undue any semblance of a man, pushing it thus in the direction of an 'emphasis of the devil's basic inhumanity' (2000: 49), making the image very bestial, a visual inversion of humanity.

Conclusion

Using ethnographic work conducted in specific Brazilian Catholic contexts, I have sought to argue in this article that *faith* and *miracle* should be conceptualized as social categories of understanding that organize relationships of people to nature and to the supernatural. I proposed that to understand the native meanings attributed to faith and miracle, Brazilian Catholicism must be viewed through a cosmological lens, for natives conceive of their world cosmologically.

This perspective brought into focus different aspects of the category of miracle (grace, cure, blessing, apparitions, signs) and the manner in which it is employed (by way of people-devotees and the supernatural-divinities/saints). Above all else, I have suggested that faith, as a category, is fundamental to the constitution of this Catholic cosmology in its meanings and described uses: faith-religion, faith-belief, faith-human condition. In particular, and as a precondition for a Catholic existence, a meaning of the human faith-condition involves the conception of *faith* as nature (derived from the supernatural), since it is intrinsic to humanity, even if it fluctuates. This also suggests that faith needs to be practiced and that there exists a distance at which more faith (more practice) signifies a more profound closeness with the supernatural, the human, and therefore an increased 'capacity' to receive miracles, rewards. As we have seen, moreover, these categories make the lived world of these Catholics meaningful.

The categories of faith and miracle, therefore, are constructed and utilized because the Catholic cosmological system establishes a world in which nature-culture-supernatural simultaneously possess exclusive and inclusive dimensions, for nature and culture are derivatives, creations of the supernatural. Faith and miracle – as social categories of understanding – exist to order, legitimate, and make sense of the relationships established among the dimensions: humans, nature, and divine beings.

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