

# VIOLENCE, CITIZENSHIP, AND RELIGION IN A RIO DE JANEIRO FAVELA

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*Abstract: Across Latin America armed groups have come to dominate large sectors of social, political, and economic activity in poor and working-class communities. While scholars have noted the importance of religion in offering individuals and communities protection from violence, there has been relatively little study of the place of religion in contemporary armed activity in the region. This paper looks at the role of religion in the governance practices of an armed group in one Rio de Janeiro favela. The article will show that religious activities in this context provide an important arena in which members of the armed group can discuss autonomous and collaborative strategies to address security issues in the city. Most critically, religious discourse provides space to move discussions of politics in this community away from issues of citizenship and rights and into a discussion of justice and the distribution of resources among poor communities.*

Rio de Janeiro has experienced significant criminal violence since the mid-1980s. During this period the city has faced a rolling security crisis in which violence has diffused from the state into the hands of various armed actors, leading to questions about the meaning of citizenship in the city. Indeed, a host of scholars and policy makers have characterized favelas as parallel polities set apart from the city as a whole (Arias 2006, 6–8).

Conflict in Rio reached its peak in 1995, when there were 67 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. A slow but long-term decline in homicides has occurred since then, with the number falling to 23 per 100,000 in 2011. Nevertheless the city remains a highly violent place characterized by ongoing engagements between an imperfect police force that often takes bribes from the very criminals it claims to be fighting, and drug traffickers that dominate the favelas (shantytowns), where perhaps a quarter of the city's 6.3 million inhabitants live.

Poor and working-class Rio residents have developed a wide variety of strategies to deal with the complex political and social situations they confront. These have included organizing through nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) instead of official associative groups and reducing their general involvement in local civic affairs. Others have sought protection by joining Evangelical religious communities, which, in the context of urban violence, provide a social circle that seeks to remove itself and the families associated with it from the wider problem of drug abuse that many believe accompanies much gang activity. Indeed, today Rio de Janeiro is nearly one-quarter Evangelical, with high concentrations in the

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poorer, often gang dominated, areas of the city (Damasceno, Schmidt, and Magalhães 2013).

In Rio, one other option for families fearing gang activity involves moving to communities controlled by police-connected protection groups known as *milícias* (militias). These organizations, which dominate significant portions of the rapidly growing West Zone of the city as well as some areas in the North Zone, impose order by preventing gang activity and ostentatious drug dealing. Their principal earnings come through taxing local business and maintaining often violently enforced monopolies over certain large-scale commercial activities, though recently these activities have become more clandestine as a result of successful investigations (Cano and Duarte 2012, 90). With some variation over the years, these groups have also involved themselves deeply in politics, electing their members to public office and providing favored politicians with privileged access to the areas they control.

What role does religion play in the political imaginary of these violent groups, and how does religion, along with other elements of local life, contribute to the emergence of distinct forms of local political subjectivity within these communities? Elsewhere I have argued that Latin America's democracies operate within a system of violent pluralism in which various actors control the means of violence and shape the context of local political life (Arias and Goldstein 2010). This plurally violent political life operates within and through a set of political practices and subjectivities defined in part by the type of armed violence that takes place in a particular subnational context (Arias 2013). This article will explore how the *milícia* in one Rio favela engaged in political-religious discourse and practices during the 2008 municipal election. The evidence will show that *milícia* members' religious activities parallel wider political practices in Rio but also provide a unique vantage point from which to critique the state and discuss autonomous and collaborative strategies to address local conditions. Whereas many discussions of citizenship focus on rights, the claims made by the *milícia* focus on justice and the unjust distribution of resources, not across classes but among deserving and undeserving poor communities.

#### VIOLENCE AND CITIZENSHIP IN LATIN AMERICA

In debates about citizenship and violence in the region, scholars often write about the deficit of rights that emerges in the region's imperfect democracies. Most notably, Guillermo O'Donnell (1993, 16) offered the concept of low-intensity citizenship, in which citizens' basic political rights, especially the right to vote in generally free, fair, and open elections, remain intact while civil rights become attenuated because of the inability of the state to effectively extend the rule of law across the national territory. Teresa Caldeira and James Holston (1999) argued that Brazil evidences a disjunctive citizenship, in which lived political experience and, indeed, the sites of popular mobilization for a more complete realization of rights, lie between the robust concessions of rights in Brazil's 1988 constitution and a reality of exclusion and violence directed against the largely nonwhite poor

population, which has suffered historic abuses. Philip Oxhorn (2003, 58) has argued that a lack of effective civic representation has contributed to the attenuated citizenship that operates in much of the region.

Scholars working on collective efforts to gain recognition for ethnic and racial group rights have focused on how the creation of organizations that can effectively dialogue with the state on behalf of groups increases the chances that rights will be delivered to them. Juliet Hooker (2005, 291) has argued that collective actors that are able to effectively articulate a group identity set apart from standard citizenship claims are more successful than other groups in having the state concede to them particular rights. Deborah Yashar, in her work on indigenous groups (2005, 71–82), suggests that understanding citizenship in Latin America involves looking closely at the capacity of civic groups and the space those groups have to mobilize for group rights within the wider citizenship regime. These visions of citizenship, while not explicitly speaking to the question of urban violence, see a plural form of political subjectivity emerging in the region. There is not one form of citizenship but rather multiple forms of citizenship and political subjectivity advanced by organized groups that operate side by side within particular countries.

Armed violence poses distinct challenges to the realization of citizenship rights in urban Latin America. Holston has argued that real advances in Brazilian citizenship issues have emerged from cultural transformations in which less well-off “insurgent citizens” insist on new social and political practices that respect their rights under the constitution. While some scholars see criminals as actors who undermine rights, Holston takes care to show how gang leaders in Rio have adopted the language of democracy, markedly similar to the rhetoric of insurgent citizenship used by the progressive civic leaders he studies in São Paulo (2008, 273–274, 309). In a sense, then, everybody has become a democrat.

The rhetoric Holston examines faces two empirical limitations. First, his analysis only examines the language used by gang leaders and thus may not be generalizable to other types of armed actors in Rio. Second, the rhetoric is composed primarily of documents such as press releases issued by imprisoned gang leaders and used to explain violent protests undertaken by those actors in efforts to bring attention to their treatment in prison, and documents internal to the gang itself. The rhetoric Holston analyzes is directed at the state and to society at large rather than to the communities that gangs dominate. Finally, Holston’s analysis looks at the rhetoric of politics rather than the practices and rhetoric of domination exercised by these groups within the communities they control.

In this article I seek to come to a deeper understanding of armed actors by looking closely at the rhetoric of *milícia*-aligned actors as they sought to position themselves for the 2008 Rio municipal elections in the community in which they operated. Religion provides a critical terrain for analyzing armed actors’ thoughts about politics and their own economic activities. Moving beyond direct demands made of the state to examining political and nonpolitical statements made by armed leaders in a religious context will provide important insights into how political and social subjectivities come together as these actors articulate their

position within the communities they dominate, participate in forming broad and multilayered local subjectivities, and seek to articulate the engagement between the community they control and the state.

#### APPROACHES TO CRIME, VIOLENCE, AND RELIGION

In the 1990s I spoke with a Catholic activist in a favela who expressed real disappointment with the posture of the Catholic Church toward criminal violence. Shortly after a massacre took place in her community, she told me that the Catholic Church had done nothing to help residents and that the priests seemed frightened of coming into the community and taking action to comfort residents or help confront violence. She contrasted this with Evangelicals, who she said walked through the community holding the Bible aloft and preaching even in the most difficult circumstances.

This activist's sentiments echoed observations David Smilde has made about the role of religious practice and performance in helping Evangelicals in Caracas deal with the high levels of crime they face in that city. Smilde (2007) observes that Evangelicals adopt particular comportments such as visibly carrying their Bibles as they move through space to ward off assaults from muggers. He also notes that the Evangelicals he researched sought to prevent theft by using religious language in negotiations with assailants over what goods they will deliver to them. Smilde suggests that the internalization of religious behaviors and the way these behaviors are collectively perceived provides Evangelicals with a margin of protection that is not available to others.

Some scholars working on crime and religion in the region have focused more directly on gang conversion ministries. In the Latin American context, Robert Brenneman and Kevin O'Neill have taken this argument furthest. These authors, in different ways, have explored religious conversion among gang members and its varying effects on individual lives. For Brenneman (2012), the conversion process is an extended and elliptical personal and performative transformation moving across a series of different activities that dialectically change an individual's physical appearance, behavior, and interior self to alter his social position, offering such individuals a difficult path out of criminal activity. O'Neill (2011) is more ambivalent about the value of religious transformation, seeing gang recovery ministries as a piece of a broader ideology of Christian citizenship through which a society can achieve improved outcomes as a result of individual conversions, which O'Neill sees as deeply connected to neoliberalism. This is exemplified by a USAID-sponsored program in Guatemala in which recovering Evangelical gang members participate in a reality show focused on their efforts to run a profitable business and stabilize their postcriminal lives (O'Neill 2011, 337). Key to these conceptions of gang recovery through Christianity is how faith produces internal transformations that become manifest in personal aesthetics and behaviors. O'Neill builds on post-Foucauldian ideas of how the embedded ideologies of the state transform individual and collective experience (Mitchell 1991, 89–95; Trouillot 2001, 131–133). For O'Neill's subjects, being a "good Christian" is an important component of being a "good Guate-

malan," and greater Christian works aid the recovery of Guatemala from its suffering (O'Neill 2009).

These approaches help explain religion's role in repositioning subjects in Latin American politics. This article looks beyond that repositioning to invert the equation and address two overlooked components of the violence-religion nexus. First, what role do religious institutions and activities play in the lives of the region's violent actors? Across Latin America there are examples of the real and purported interrelationship between religion and armed activity, such as Santa Muerte in Mexico, La Familia Michoacana's quasi-religious self-image, the "Fé em Deus" phrase used by Rio's Comando Vermelho prison faction as a brief prayer, and some Rio gangs' use of Afro-Brazilian syncretistic iconography (Roush, this issue; Kolb 2013; Grillo 2011; Alvito 2001). However, we know little about how criminal-religious subjectivities affect wider political and social life. Second, how do armed actors' religious articulations operate politically? In the context of the group examined here, I will show that religious faith operates in parallel to and intertwined with wider political ideologies. Religion may not motivate violence, as some have suggested (Lauder 2009; Juergensmeyer 2003; Huntington 1993), but the exercise of certain types of violence by those claiming to operate within Christian beliefs can, these actors argue, help the wider community.

In many ways these claims are not new. In the context of the Ríos Montt regime in Guatemala, Virginia Garrard-Burnett (2010, 143) argues that particular understandings of Christianity provided a framework to legitimize grave crimes against the population and were part of a broader effort to transform religious faith in that country. Similarly, Adrienne Pine (2008) and Teresa Caldeira (1996) have each argued that the state often justifies violence against suspects within religious frameworks of personal responsibility and the diffusion of sin. The discussion below will show how these structures are embedded within particular localized practices of citizenship and how armed actors operating at the nexus of political, religious, and ethnic subjectivities forge local identities in order to more effectively make political demands.

#### CONFLICT AND THE CONSTITUTION OF NEW SUBJECTS

Ensnared within Rio de Janeiro's favelas, armed actors have transformed those regions' political context. Rio's favelas are generally formally led by Associações de Moradores (residents' associations), which began to be organized in favelas in the 1950s and 1960s at the behest of Church and state officials (McCann 2013, 141–145). These groups emerged as centers of public advocacy and sought patronage to obtain improvements crucial to basic local survival (Leeds 1996). Armed groups operated in this context and often sought to involve themselves in political affairs by controlling residents' associations indirectly (Arias 2006).

A key development in Rio over the past two decades has been the rise of *milícias*. Like nearby suburban municipalities, the West Zone, where these groups are concentrated, has a long history of vigilantism and police-connected death squads, which evolved with the growth of the area and the fear of the drug trade into more robust and locally dominant armed organizations (Arias 2009; Cano

and Duarte 2012, 14). Operating in this rapidly growing city region, some politicians recognized *milícias*' potential to contain the grave threats they believed the drug trade posed. In 2008, after her election to city council, Carminha Jerominho, a *milícia*-connected politician, used the concepts of evil and temptation to discuss the importance of *milícias*, saying, "I am not in favor of the *milícia*, but it is a lesser evil than the drug trade. Traffickers tempt children into criminal activity, making more bandits. With the *milícias* in communities, we do not see minors in the midst of armed people" (Campagnani 2008). Cesar Maia, a three-term mayor, declared that the *milícias* were not criminal organizations but community self-defense groups that were a lesser evil than drug gangs (Botari and Ramalho 2006). José Mariano Beltrame, Rio's much-celebrated state secretary for public safety, admitted before a parliamentary inquiry commission in the Rio State Assembly that he had been mistaken in considering the *milícias* a "lesser evil" (Lima 2008).

These organizations' power, their political connections, and their profitable economic model generated conditions in which they emerged as key intermediaries between the population and the political system in the areas they dominated.

#### APPROPRIATIONS: CRIME AND RELIGION IN THE 2008 RIO MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

With more than forty thousand inhabitants, Rio das Pedras is one of Rio's largest favelas. It sits in the West Zone near a mountainside a short drive from the city's wealthy South Zone. A vigilante group has long dominated the area, maintaining order and providing social services principally through the local residents' association, the Associação de Moradores e Amigos do Rio das Pedras (AMARP). In the mid-1990s vigilantes deepened their ties with police, and the *milícia* structure took shape, with the members dominating segments of the economy and imposing protection taxes on business owners. Over the next decade, this organization developed close ties with Rio's dominant political machines. The group took a militant antidrug stance and actively sought to prevent local drug dealing and consumption.

#### *The Centralization of Civic Life*

The AMARP sits at the core of a seemingly vibrant civic life. This organization, long controlled by *milícia*-connected individuals, operates out of a large headquarters in the community's commercial center. In 2008 this organization provided a remarkable level of services, including professionalization classes, college and vocational degree programs, and leisure activities. Over the decades, the AMARP has played a critical role in expanding the neighborhood through land invasions, allocating and transferring land title, and keeping drug addicts and persons that leaders perceived as predatory criminals out of the community.

This organization, however, sought to repress alternative representative structures. The AMARP interfered with three potentially competing community associations. In two cases groups organizing separate associations in this large community were repressed through pressure and threats (Burgos 2002, 59). One local organizer reported, "We weren't allowed to have an association here because

there was already one."<sup>1</sup> Milícia members murdered one of the leaders of a commercial association that would have organized business owners that the milícia taxed (Farias 2002, 146–148; ALERJ 2009, 147).

The AMARP only allowed milícia-connected organizations to deliver social services. In one case a young man starting a community radio needed to incorporate as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) to receive a license. He avoided telling the AMARP about his prospective NGO because, he said, they would never have approved. After the organization's papers came through he received a call from a high-ranking *miliciano* advising him that his NGO "could not conduct any type of social action in the favela because only the AMARP could do this activity" (Vives 2009, 86). I worked closely with the one small, externally supported NGO. The leader of this group frequently expressed her exasperation with the AMARP and said she felt her group was slowly being pushed out. Commenting on the status of local nonprofit activities this organizer said, "The social programs they support aren't really to change how people think. They are all run by people from the community and they play games with the kids but they don't create consciousness."<sup>2</sup> Daví, a resident of Muzema, a nearby milícia-controlled neighborhood, noted, in a conversation that included residents of Rio das Pedras and the nearby gang-controlled favela of Rocinha, that in Rio das Pedras "everything goes through the association. You can't do anything without their permission." Comparing Rio das Pedras to Rocinha, where the conversation took place, he said, "Here you have your own judgment, there you don't. People here can talk without permission."<sup>3</sup> Thus, the AMARP and the milícia created a tightly centralized system of organizing dominated by a handful of key milícia-connected players.

### *Political Issues*

As was the case with other West Zone milícia-led communities, Rio das Pedras achieved remarkable electoral success in the late 1990s and 2000s. Rapid growth drew political attention to the area in the 1990s. Josinaldo "Nadinho" Francisco da Cruz, a prominent milícia leader and AMARP president, built an alliance with longtime conservative mayor Cesar Maia. These contacts brought in state funding and supported Nadinho's 2004 election to city council in exchange for his support of Maia and his allies.

The milícia's political success would be its undoing. Whereas Nadinho was close to Maia's political machine, the state government, then controlled by former governor Anthony Garotinho's political machine, appointed police inspector Félix Tostes, also a Rio das Pedras milícia member, to an administrative position in the state government. Conflicts around the 2006 elections, in which Tostes and Nadinho supported different congressional candidates, as well as an emerging

1. Quote from conversation with Adriana, older female resident, April 16, 2008; also conversation with Júlio, middle-aged male resident, April 25, 2008; and conversation with Roberto, May 2, 2008. All names of interview subjects are pseudonyms.

2. Conversation with Ágata, NGO organizer, April 14, 2008.

3. Statement by Daví in conversation with Isilda and Micael, May 26, 2008.

alliance between Nadinho and another politically powerful milícia, contributed to Tostes's murder at the hands of assassins associated with the rival milícia.

As a result of this murder, other Rio das Pedras milicianos largely excluded Nadinho from the community. They mounted a competing internal campaign to ensure that Nadinho would not return to the city council. This group included Jorge Alberto "Beto Bomba" Moreth, an ambitious young miliciano under investigation for murder, who served as the chief enforcer for the local informal money-lending operation. Moreth was also running for the AMARP presidency. The group also included Epaminondas Queiroz, a retired police captain and the de facto milícia leader.

#### *A Demonstration of Faith in Rio das Pedras*

On the evening of September 24, 2008, Fernando Moraes, a senior member of Rio's Polícia Civil who had served as the commander of the elite antikidnapping unit, came to a Rio das Pedras Assembly of God congregation to deliver a campaign speech in his run for city council. Moraes at the time was affiliated with the Partido da República, a small center-right party. He had bases of electoral support outside Rio das Pedras and was brought to the community by the milícia in part to draw votes from Nadinho. I was invited to the event by his Rio das Pedras campaign team, a group of activists connected to the milícia.

The service began with Pastor Quitério, the congregation's leader, and two other ministers standing in front of a gathering that half-filled the high-ceilinged sanctuary while a band played church hymns and congregants filed in. Eventually Moreth, the ambitious young miliciano running for the presidency of the AMARP, arrived and knelt to pray near the front of the sanctuary. Moraes, a fit middle-aged man with light brown hair, then appeared and took a seat near the front. Pastor Quitério, who had told me a few months earlier that his congregation does not engage in politics,<sup>4</sup> gave a sermon on the horrors of kidnapping focused on the abduction of Pastor Isaías, a high-ranking Assembly of God cleric, and the role of God, through his earthly instrument, in saving him. Quitério then introduced Moraes.

With gospel music softly playing in the background, Moraes spoke of God's support in his work as commander of Rio's antikidnapping squad. He began with a short reading from the book of Acts on the angelic liberation of the apostle Peter. He quickly turned to his role in freeing Pastor Isaías, emphasizing kidnapping's horror. He recounted the frantic and unsuccessful search that led his unit around Rio and to a shantytown in Duque de Caxias, a distant suburb. After searching unsuccessfully he called in support from another 250 police. As the day was ending he became increasingly desperate, knowing that the kidnapers would likely kill the hostage to avoid capture since the police had come so close to the hideaway. Walking with local police commanders he reached a river at the

4. Conversation with Pastor Quitério, June 20, 2008.

shantytown's edge but found nothing. As they returned, a woman surreptitiously pointed him toward a house that had bars instead of windows. Looking in the house, however, he saw nothing. As he began to leave, he heard someone quietly say, "God, please save me." He and others returned to the house, broke down the door, and found the pastor. Isaías, Moraes noted, said that "the power of God had saved him." Moraes then said, "I realized he was right. Most people never know what it is like to save someone's life but I have had the privilege to feel that. I have done that a hundred times. I have been God's tool to save people's lives."

Moraes's tone then changed. He claimed he was not a politician, saying he would keep his word to bring change to Rio. Praising the energy of pastors like Quitério, Moraes fervently offered to pay for half the service's collection goal, about R\$3,900.<sup>5</sup> Leaving the stage, Moraes embraced Moreth and affirmed their friendship "no matter what appears in the papers and on television."<sup>6</sup>

Pastor Quitério then declared that "all political institutions are created by God" and that politicians should follow a centrist path. He called on Moreth to evangelize the congregation. Moreth, a short and heavily muscled young man, asked members of the congregation to close their eyes and pray. As his prayer built momentum, he loudly exhorted the congregation to pray and said, "Rio has problems, and the biggest problem is public security." He concluded, "Here we don't have that problem because of the vigilance of God and vigilance here." He referred to people in the community as "sentinels" of God. Pastor Quitério concluded the service with the congregation singing the hymn "Soldados de Deus" (Soldiers of God).

#### *Analyzing Religion in Fernando Moraes's Arrival in Rio das Pedras*

There are several points worth highlighting in the service that indicate the role religion plays in a local political life dominated by an informal armed organization. The speeches during the service characterized the nature of security and a particular connection between religion and political subjectivity in the local context of violence.

The service began with Quitério's introduction and Moraes's story. This segment grounded hostage liberation in scripture as God's work. Both speakers referred to an angel's miraculous freeing of Saint Peter from Herod's prison. Moraes then used religious terms to discuss his work as commander of the antikidnaping squad to release Isaías and described hearing Isaías praying to God just as Moraes despaired of finding him. Instead of focusing on the election, he focused on God's role in his life, a trope especially appealing to the congregation. Moraes said that he could be trusted, if not as a police officer or a politician then as a man of God, and that, as a police officer, he had served as God's instrument.

The second segment involves Moraes's frank discussion of politics. Here he explicitly rejects politics-as-usual, saying he will be honest and fulfill his prom-

5. At the time equivalent to US\$1,900.

6. Observations of meeting at Rio das Pedras Assembly of God congregation, September 24, 2008.

ises. He then offers money to the congregation and crosses the altar to embrace Moreth, vouching for his innocence of the charges against him. In doing so, he gives his support to Moreth and also indicates that he does not believe the accusations. This partially immunizes Moraes against accusations of consorting with a suspected felon, and it shows him to be a different type of politician and perhaps a more honest one. The embrace also delivers some of Moraes's credibility as an antikidnapping specialist to Moreth, the local vigilante who claims to protect the community. The funds establish his more direct support of the congregation and foreshadow what he may deliver once in office.

In the third part of the service Moreth offers prayers not endorsing Moraes so much as justifying, in religious terms, the milícia's role in the community. He identifies security as the key problem facing Rio and says Rio das Pedras has avoided that problem because God's "sentinels" work there and remain vigilant. The milícia and his own violent activities thus become God's work, and while the city of Rio is flawed, its most significant problems have been resolved in Rio das Pedras. In this sense Moreth, like Moraes, is God's instrument and the community is protected by Moreth's and other milicianos' efforts.

#### *The Broader Rio das Pedras Political Campaign*

During the first half of 2008, prior to coming under investigation by the state legislature, Epaminondas Queiroz, the retired police captain who was the milícia's de facto chief, publicly led efforts to oust Nadinho from the council. Queiroz invested considerable resources in making improvements in the community and delivered some social services through offices around the neighborhood. Queiroz, who campaigned with Moreth, sought to attract broader attention to his electoral effort through listening sessions around the community.

In May, Queiroz organized a large event in a particularly poor part of the community to discuss his eventually aborted city council campaign. The event, which was attended by several hundred residents, took place on a public plaza. Queiroz, who was a less capable public speaker than either Moreth or Moraes, haltingly discussed his connection to the community and his potential role as a public representative. He outlined a number of local improvement projects he planned to support, including paving streets, improving sanitation, and upgrading electrical equipment. Indirectly addressing the fact that Nadinho stood accused of the murder of Félix Tostes, Queiroz said, "but this isn't politics. I'm not saying this to get votes. I am saying this because I am going to do it. It will be done now, before the election, not afterwards. I am not running for office just to . . . have immunity. I am not an assassin . . . who does nothing. I am running because I want to make things better." He went on to address local concerns about violence and, using language similar to that which Moreth later used in the church service, made the case for someone associated with the milícia seeking office:

There is no trafficking in this community. Now we need to fight for what the community wants. We need to have asphalt, sewerage, we need to clean up the trash. . . . The most com-

mon complaint about the city [in a survey] was public security, but here in Rio das Pedras not one person . . . listed security as their main concern. Here people said they needed sewerage, asphalt. Let's do these things. . . . People come from Medellín and other cities and they ask about why there is so little violence here. I tell them it is the culture of the place, the hardworking people from the Northeast."<sup>7</sup>

As in the church service, Queiroz highlights security as the key difference between Rio das Pedras and other neighborhoods, and he attributes that success to the local culture of Northeastern migrants.

After the event ended with a speech by Moreth that focused on distributing patronage jobs to area residents, I spoke with Urânia, one of the leaders of the political team that would campaign for Moraes. Asked about Queiroz's speech, she responded: "Here we don't have trafficking, but we don't have [any government services]. All the [government] money goes to places where there is trafficking. Here we have one of the two largest communities in Rio and we have no trafficking. Shouldn't we get something because things are right? All the money ends up in places with trafficking because the government wants to help deal with that, but the money ends up with the traffickers." Asked if Rio das Pedras received any money from the Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento (PAC), a large-scale, federally funded infrastructure program, Urânia went on, "There is no PAC, it went to communities with trafficking and then the traffickers got identification badges. Shouldn't we get something as the largest community and one with no trafficking? Queiroz will work to get us this stuff."<sup>8</sup> Urânia's statements echoed and deepened the issues Queiroz discussed, focusing explicitly on the unjust distribution of state resources among favelas.

Queiroz's and Urânia's statements were similar to the speeches during the Assembly of God service. Both highlighted Rio's political corruption and how the political system shortchanges a "good" community without drug trafficking in favor of sending resources to places where they believed brazen lawbreaking took place, in this way benefitting drug gangs. The state itself, in this interpretation, becomes a part of the problem, using resources to empower and protect drug dealers when it should send money to Rio das Pedras's upstanding citizens, to a neighborhood where, in Queiroz's words, public safety is not a major issue. The community is a model, he argues, that even people from Medellín visit to look for solutions. Queiroz states that local crime is low because of the hardworking community of Northeasterners there, in contrast to Rio natives living in gang-controlled areas, who have different values and cultural attributes, he believes. Community behavior and the cultural attributes associated with the Northeastern origin of many residents are, then, key to understanding Rio das Pedras. These comportments, of course, include the role of religion and devotion in helping the community maintain these conditions. Citizenship and rights are not mentioned.

7. Observations of public meeting in Rio das Pedras, May 21, 2008.

8. Conversation with Urânia, longtime resident and political activist, May 21, 2008. Here she refers to a scandal brewing in city papers at the time, in which gang members in other communities had received worker identification tags associating them with the construction project.

*Civic Life and Religion in Rio das Pedras*

The engagement between political leaders and religious life in Rio das Pedras was not limited just to the milícia faction that sought to affect the election's outcome. Indeed, Nadinho's wife led a campaign event built around religious themes just outside the community to support her husband's reelection. In addition, Geiso Turques, an alleged miliciano who was a member of the city council of São Gonçalo, a Rio suburb with nearly one million inhabitants, identified as an Evangelical Christian.

Turques ran the Castelo das Pedras, a successful local nightclub that attracted large crowds to listen to some of Rio's top funk music.<sup>9</sup> The Castelo was organized as a nonprofit. However, an investigation by the Rio State Legislative Assembly identified it as a money-laundering structure for the milícia (Ramalho 2008). The institution operated as a nightclub on some evenings but also hosted church services and delivered social services. In an interview with Regina Célia Azevedo Vives, a graduate student at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas, Turques discussed the connection between religious practice, law, and violence. These views have important similarities with the political rhetoric discussed above and shed light on the connections between religion, civic activity, and local armed organization.

In this interview, Turques sought to stand apart from Rio das Pedras's political events, saying that, since he served as a São Gonçalo councilor, his work in Rio das Pedras focused wholly inside the walls of Castelo. Speaking of his own political office and the question of safety, Turques pointed to the importance of God in his life and in saving the lives of others:

Everything that we have is built by God. I set up the funk [dance party]. . . . God knows everything. If today I am here in the Castelo it is because God put me here. If today I am a São Gonçalo city councillor all those authorities were sent by God. But nobody sees that. . . . People see you with other eyes. Because when we open the door to the church we can save many lives out there. . . . The only thing that saves is Jesus Christ. (Azevedo Vives 2009, 49)

While not explicitly related to the electoral campaign, this statement raises some key issues regarding the connections between religious practice, violence, and politics. As stated at the Assembly of God Service by both Moreth, the miliciano seeking to lead the AMARP, and Moraes, the city council candidate, God provides political power and life. Turques asserted that his position as city councillor comes from God. In the context of the violence affecting Rio, it is also telling that Turques identified the church as an institution that can save lives, stating, "The only thing that saves is Jesus Christ." These claims are similar to those made by his fellow police officer Moraes when he identified the role of God in saving the kidnapped pastor. This statement also connects to Moreth's statement that only "vigilance" has protected the community from drug trafficking.

In this interview, Turques also discussed the place of his nightclub in Rio das Pedras. The Castelo, he noted, came to Rio das Pedras because he organized

9. Rio funk is a type of hip-hop that developed in the 1990s, with similarities to the Miami bass style.

shows around the city but there was nowhere to set up a permanent nightclub for this popular music.<sup>10</sup> In most favelas, he noted, drug traffickers subsidized these dances, leaving no space for his venue (Vives 2009, 28). In Rio das Pedras, however, he worked with local leaders to set up the enterprise. Addressing the investigation of the Castelo, Turques returned again to religion, noting, "I can't do illegal things because my things are legal. . . . Whoever is in the word of our Lord cannot do wrong things. . . . They said this wasn't a social center, I am changing it into a club to pay up the taxes they want me to pay. Okay, does it have to be that way? I will do it that way. Because God is at the head of this business" (Vives 2009, 31).

Of course, like many religious discourses, this statement admits more than one interpretation. On the one hand, it seems to suggest that Turques avoids engaging in illegal activities since he is godly, and that accusations against him were therefore spurious. On the other hand, the statement could be interpreted to mean that when a man lives within the "word of God," his actions cannot be illegal because God guides them even if they are at odds with how state officials interpret the law. Turques's strikingly ambivalent statement shows the complexity of religious engagements of law and legality.

#### *Analyzing Political-Religious Practice and Subjectivity in Rio das Pedras*

The discussion above provides a stark picture of the civic life and subjectivity of residents in the context of the local armed domination. The milícia sought to shape social practices and subjectivities in Rio das Pedras and in its connections with outsiders. In the dense and interconnected social context of Rio de Janeiro, the milícia had only limited control of local social and political life. It did, however, seek to constrain and channel social and political activities.

The AMARP's response to a Catholic social ministry in the favela crystallized the way the group constrained other local actors. In 2009, one newspaper reported, the milícia expelled a Catholic Church center from the community. The eviction notice was delivered by "the president of the residents' association, Jorge Alberto Moreth, . . . accompanied by two armed men who were his bodyguards." Clergy said the eviction was "retaliation by the leaders of the milícia against the Catholic Church for not permitting the control of donations and of the social work carried out by the church in the community" (quoted in Barros 2009).

Religion and religious institutions helped articulate local subjectivities and institutional politics amid urban violence. The expulsion of the Catholic social ministry and the Assembly of God service indicate the weight the milícia gives to such organizations and their activities. This section will highlight how religion operates alongside other factors in the political and social life of the community to articulate identities and shape security practices. Religion can provide protection and solace in a dangerous environment. Religion itself offers a basis for assisting subjects who are very much at risk in Rio's differential citizenship system, in

10. It is worth noting that the Emoções nightclub had long operated in the nearby favela of Rocinha.

which the poor disproportionately suffer both police and gang violence, and offering them a mode of conceiving of and interacting with the world in which they receive material and spiritual protection (Lehnen 2013).

This article identifies several issues regarding the role of religion in the *milícia*'s governance of the community. First, the *milícia* recognizes the community's underlying organizational pluralism but seeks to channel that pluralism into the AMARP's orbit. The AMARP, as a result, operates as the community's central mediator with outside forces. As shown above, *milícia* actors work through religious organizations as they position themselves and the community in relation to the broader life of Rio das Pedras and the city. Religious organizations, meetings, and sites provide spaces to articulate a vision of the community and help to mediate connections with actors from outside the community.

Second, *milicianos* like to present Rio das Pedras as a community without serious public security problems and suggest that the community has achieved this through internal agency rather than state actions. Security emerges from local efforts and is attributed to either divinely inspired vigilance or the community's Northeastern character. From either perspective, the community is set apart from other Rio favelas. Critically, religious and secular claims enunciated by *milícia* leaders operate in parallel but make the same point—Rio das Pedras is a different sort of place, markedly better than other communities. Indeed, the *milícia*'s religious and cultural claims are ultimately the same point made in different registers.

Third, these statements suggest that Rio das Pedras is more deserving of political patronage than other favelas. According to both Queiroz, the retired police captain who was the *de facto* leader of the *milícia*, and Urânia, the local political activist, Rio das Pedras does not receive as much government financial support as gang-controlled communities because of what they believe are ideas within state institutions that money should be given to those other areas to help control drug dealing. Urânia argues that Rio das Pedras should receive more support because it solves its own problems. In this sense Queiroz and Urânia, like Moreth, the *miliciano* running for AMARP president, claim that Rio das Pedras is a more just community for resolving its problems and, at a deeper level, that it is fitting that the community should receive more resources. They don't discuss the relative resource distribution between elite and working-class interests. Rather, they focus on distribution between more- and less-deserving impoverished communities. Rio das Pedras deserves resources because its divine sentinels and Northeastern culture have protected it from what *milícia* members define as crime.

Fourth, statements made during the religious service and by Turques, the Castelo das Pedras owner, highlight religion's role in political institutions and efforts to protect life. Turques and Moraes, the council candidate, state that a connection to the divine can save lives. In Moraes's case, God works through the state to rescue kidnapping victims. Pastor Quitério makes it clear that political institutions themselves are divine and that their flaws are those of the individuals who lead them. Turques attributes his seat on the São Gonçalo city council to God, and he also states that as a faithful Christian he cannot operate outside the law. Law itself becomes defined by an individual's religious position.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF CITIZENSHIP AND RELIGION IN LATIN AMERICA

This article has examined the political and religious activities of individuals involved in or connected to an armed organization. This analysis contextualizes and adds to debates on religion, citizenship, and violence in the region by showing that the Rio das Pedras milícia operates on religious and other registers of subjectivity to critique state policy and articulate locally collaborative strategies of resolving the serious security issues affecting impoverished areas of Rio de Janeiro. This analysis, while reaffirming the concepts of differentiated citizenship, points to a strategy of resolving unequal security not through a citizenship- or rights-based discourse but rather through a normative evaluation of just and unjust communities within the wider city in ways not wholly dissimilar to those observed by Daniel Goldstein in his work on vigilantes in Bolivia (Goldstein 2004). More just communities, understood as those that control their own gang and drug issues, are more deserving of state support than other communities. Local articulations of religion and Northeastern culture offer the promise of security outside the logic of citizenship, suggesting not a progressive reconciliation of *de jure* and *de facto* rights but rather a mechanism through which portions of the population find strategies of building security without a concomitant reconciliation of rights. Thus religion does not exist apart from other social and political concerns but is deeply intermeshed with them. Religious practices provide an explanatory and motivating framework for how a community that receives religiously (or culturally) guided protection from drug gangs can achieve security amid political dysfunction and corruption.

The literature on contemporary violence and religion in Latin America focuses on how religion can protect individuals from crime. Smilde (2007) shows that religious behaviors protect individual Evangelicals. O'Neill (2011) and Brenneman (2011) focus, in different ways, on gang conversion and the protections provided by that process. The statements of the milicianos presented here, however, make different claims regarding how religion offers protection. They suggest that local leaders' religious practices will provide protection to the wider collective of Rio das Pedras. In other words, protection from violence comes not from individual practices but rather from the activities of an elite that guards the whole community and serves, as Moreth put it in the Assembly of God service, as God's "sentinels." O'Neill clearly shows how Evangelical conversion can include discourses of collectivity when it presents large-scale individual conversion as a way of redeeming Guatemala. But the Rio das Pedras case differs in that only a few need adhere to religiously inspired practices while the rest benefit from their efforts. In this issue's introduction, Jeffrey Rubin, David Smilde, and Benjamin Junge suggest that religion can imbue spaces with a degree of safety, enabling individuals to "experience respite from the threats" and "reconstruct identities and social networks." In Rio das Pedras the religious practices of a few help protect a space inhabited by many.

Holston's (2008) work on citizenship focuses, in part, on the ways that armed actors in Rio adopted a rhetoric of democracy that is largely consistent with wider claims of insurgent citizenship. This article tells a more nuanced story. The Rio

das Pedras milícia seeks, through apparently autonomous local action, to redress grievances and reconcile local security with the empty promises made by the state to this population. This reconciliation, however, focuses not on making rights real, as Holston suggests, but rather on making the community just. Religion and Northeastern culture are the key registers through which this more just community is articulated. In its control of local institutions, the Rio das Pedras milícia is clearly not democratic. Similarly its political rhetoric is largely at variance with insurgent citizenship in that milicianos do not use a language of rights that calls on the state to redress local grievances. Rather the milícia argues that it, not the state, solves local problems and that the state unjustly delivers patronage to communities with high levels of drug trafficking. In this context, the milícia seeks to compete with other poor communities for resources rather than forming solidarities that might help transform the wider political system. The Rio das Pedras milícia's solution to Brazil's political failings in the context of this campaign is not to press the state to better deliver *de jure* rights to the poor, but rather for the poor to determine, through force, how those rights should be delivered in their own communities. While this may provide a type of security, this more just community is not necessarily on a path to the type of citizenship described in the 1988 constitution. Rather, it sustains its security on the basis of a separate set of religious and cultural norms, seeking insurgent citizenship through the barrel of a vigilante's gun.

A central factor in the distance between insurgent citizenship and the Rio das Pedras strategy is the milícia's ability to work not just on the register of citizenship but in various other social and political registers. Thus Rio das Pedras residents are not envisioned primarily as rights-bearing actors but rather as religious and ethnic subjects who collectively produce guarantees by working hard, following leaders, practicing religion, and staying true to Northeastern regional comportments. Nadinho's election slogan was "Northeastern, Valiant, and a Worker." The milícia thus seeks to constitute multivalent political and social subjects who are not primarily rights holders but rather are people who participate in producing their own community under the guidance of a core of violently empowered leaders. Religion and religious subjectivity, as shown throughout this article, are central to this process.

Goldstein and I have argued (2010) that Latin American political systems are increasingly characterized by a diffusion of violence. This article shows how diffuse armed actors can construct plural subjects in the areas they dominate to build legitimacy and to control political demands. These plural social identities, which go well beyond the narrow confines of citizenship, posit multiple paths to rights, services, and security that on some levels may seek to make demands of the state but that may resolve local problems across different sets of social, economic, violent, and religious strategies that lie well outside the normal expectations of political behavior in contemporary democracies. These strategies may promote a form of security, but rather than guaranteeing broader collective rights they perpetuate other forms of violence, inequality, and domination.

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