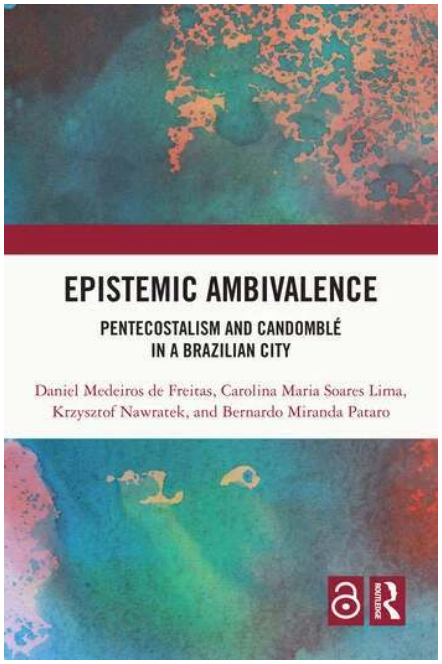
reviews

FREITAS, D. M. DE, LIMA, C. M. S, NAWRATEK, AND PATARO, B. M. (2024) EPISTEMIC AMBIVALENCE: PENTECOSTALISM AND CANDOMBLÉ IN A BRAZILIAN CITY. ROUTLEDGE. IX + 108PP. HBK £130. ISBN: 978-1-032-16312-3.

"Ambivalence" – a synonym for uncertainty, doubt and inconclusiveness – stands right at the centre of this intriguing volume. Where once we moderns knew all about religion, now it seems, the architecture has changed.

The subtitle of the introductory chapter is, 'The confusing religious landscape in Brazil', and it opens with two quotes from interviews conducted by the authors in the city of Belo Horizontale that strike right to the heart of any sense of stable ground. The first interviewee says, "I am evangelistic, but I do not like to follow the church's doctrines" while the second states, "I do not go to church … I do not have any religion. I believe in God, not a religion" (p. 1). Later, we are furnished with statistics about Brazil's religious populations including Census data specifying numbers of Catholics and Protestants (pp. 51-2; see also p. 4), as well as maps detailing the distributions of religious infrastructures in Belo Horizontale (pp. 55-64). Perhaps we are on solid ground after all. At one level, it is no surprise, given Brazil's colonial history, that the majority of Brazilians identify as Catholic. Catholic places of worship have played a structuring role in colonial urbanism; they occupy key locations in the planned urban fabric predominantly in the older, more established neighbourhoods of towns and cities, and Belo Horizontale is no exception (p. 5 and p. 60). And, amidst the demolitions, renovations and new developments of the city, the Catholic Church has, unsurprisingly, exerted a gravitational force not merely upon the shape and texture of urban space in Brazil, but in the very definition of 'religion' itself, including in the idea that Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions are evil. But with significant decreases among those identifying as Catholic in the Southeast of the country (p. 52), the presence of temples is no guarantee for the presence of worshippers (according to one study conducted in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1990s, only 18% of Catholics attend church on a weekly basis, p. 92).



By contrast, Pentecostal, charismatic and evangelical populations are growing nationally and in Belo Horizontale, their infrastructures spreading in areas of new and often precarious urban development for example along "major traffic corridors" (p. 59) as well as at the peripheries of the city, in rented spaces and in re-purposed older buildings "where the Brazilian State has been absent in providing basic services" (p. 103), although they are also sometimes built from scratch to compete "for symbolic dominance" (p. 62), such as the main church of the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD). But evangelical success in areas experiencing rapid urban change also points to "fluid loyalty among Protestants, with many … attending different temples or switching between churches" (p. 54) as well as "a more informal and

ephemeral territorialisation within urban areas" with Pentecostal churches often showing signs of "recent renovations, [and] makeshift construction solutions" (p. 56), suggesting simultaneously a vibrant and elusive urban footprint. Moreover, the fact that Pentecostal groups mobilise television among a range of media including also radio stations and newspapers as well as content on digital platforms, points to another index of the spatial, albeit one not tied down to any conventionally emnbodied materialisation of urban experience.

Finally, the infrastructures of other religions such as Candomblé and Umbanda are often invisible, as their spaces typically lack external, identifying features and their practices depend on oral (rather than textual) sources for transmission and are also often shrouded in secrecy (p.95). Yet in the Concórdia neighbourhood of the city, which has a substantial black population, the terreiros are discernible (p. 64). This selective visibility is compounded by the "syncretic strategies" (p. 27) of Afro-Brazilian religions which in some instances "self-describe as part of the Catholic Church" (p. 53) but in any case, are typically moving blends of practices, materials and ideas drawn from a variety of cultural and religious resources, constituted at least in part by historical experiences of racism and economic inequality.

Central to this study in uncertainty are the trans-disciplinary methods of the research team, which are summarised in the final chapter as a "phenomenological-hermeneutical-decolonial approach" (p. 98). One might question the preponderance of classical scholarship from the Global North that frames key points of orientation in the book, notably Mircea Eliade and Pierre Bourdieu but also Simmel and Lefebvre, even if none of them would have approved of this book's embrace of uncertainty. Towards the end of the research project the team goes back to the field and to some of their interviewees, "to return part of the knowledge shared with these people and [to] understand their thoughts about our arguments. We strive[d] to ensure that we … [were] not creating a narrative that does not relate to the reality of their experiences. However, the discussions only partly addressed our arguments, [and] instead tended to open new paths of inquiry and ask further questions. It made us realise that our research will not end …" (p. 98-9). The research questions and arguments, then, did not reveal an exquisitely delimited and detailed field of study or advance new empirical data framed and made newly accessible by an innovative theoretical model. "While conversing with people, we gained a deep understanding … but when we turned to writing, we found ourselves slowly losing this understanding" (p. 104). In the spirit of indeterminacy and deconstruction the final chapter includes a reference to Babel, the demolition of which cuts humans off from the promise of perfect intersubjective understanding, and condemns them to the labour of translation and interpretation, to which this book is testament.

Paul-François Tremlett,
The Open University

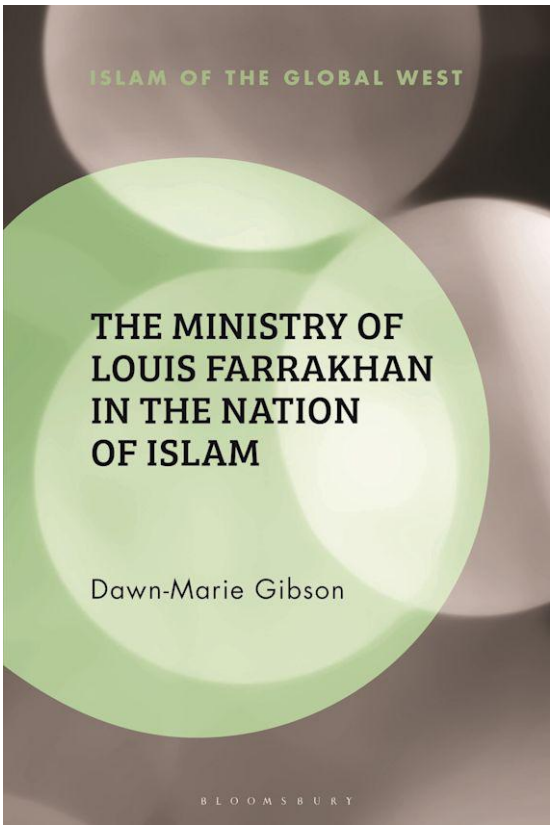
GIBSON, D-M. (2024) *THE MINISTRY OF LOUIS FARRAKHAN IN THE NATION OF ISLAM*. BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC: ISLAM OF THE GLOBAL WEST. 200 PP. HBK £85. ISBN: 9781350068520.

Dawn-Marie Gibson has authored several important texts on the Nation of Islam, which have aided greatly our understanding of the movement. In this new book she tackles the controversial and little understood figure of Louis Farrakhan, leader of the NOI since he revived the original Nation in 1979.

Farrakhan is as much a myth as a man. For many of us the myth overtakes any conception of him as a person. Still, this is a short and easily digestible book. Beginning with a necessary overview of the history of the NOI, and its critical personnel – Wallace Fard Muhammad, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X – Gibson leads us through the evolution of Louis Walcott into the original NOI's Minister Louis X and then into Louis Farrakhan, leader of the revived NOI.

From Malcolm X's acrimonious departure in 1963 until Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, Farrakhan was effectively second-in-command of the original NOI, his militant passion and ded-

ication to the cause of African Americans via the mythology and approach of the NOI replicating that of the lost frontman. In some important ways Farrakhan's background reflects that of Malcolm X. X was born to a West Indian mother and African American father who were committed Garveyites; Farrakhan was born in 1933 to a West Indian immigrant single parent, Sarah Manning, who herself was a Garveyite and later follower of Elijah Muhammad. Several factors embedded a deep conservatism in him: as well as the gender role expectations of early 20th century Black America and Garveyism, his father was a philanderer who Manning left her husband for, but played no role in Louis's life. Unlike X however, Farrakhan appears to have been a content and committed Christian prior to his conversion – brought about by explicit targeting from Elijah Muhammad, who perceived something important within him.



The story of Farrakhan is a fascinating one – the pivot of which is his being passed over to lead the NOI after Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, in favour of Muhammad's son (and FBI choice), Warith Deen – who led the NOI quickly away from the peculiarly Fardian (and peculiarly Black American) aspects, into Islamic Sunni orthodoxy. Farrakhan first ceded to Warith Deen, then left to revive his music career, before finding himself compelled to revive the NOI in its original form. He even claimed that Elijah had been taken by God and was not dead.

It would be difficult to author any book on Farrakhan, or the NOI, without mentioning the persistent allegations of antisemitism. These, and his rejection of them, are mentioned in the book's second sentence; the subject constitutes a fair proportion of Gibson's index references and a dedicated subsection (pp.97-102). Indeed, a full investigation of the history of the Nation of Islam's antisemitic rhetoric, accusations, and defences awaits writing. In Malcolm X's infamous meetings with the KKK it was dislike for Jews over which they apparently bonded; it also marked a primary step into the spotlight when Farrakhan defended then-presidential Jessie Jackson, accused of referring to New York and Jews as Hymie-town and Hymies respectively (although Jackson assured Farrakhan that he had not uttered such). The emergence of antisemitism within the Black radical tradition is one of the saddest occurrences, and little explanation of it is made in this text (indeed, it has to my mind never been given a satisfactory explanation and I wonder whether it can really be as simple as a competition for principle persecuted minority status in America).

Gibson deals with the subject frankly and without apology, noting Farrakhan's "deep distrust of Jews and a belief that their support for civil rights was directly tied to a larger goal of controlling Black leaders." (99) In some places however her descriptions could be aided by deeper contextualisation and examination; she writes that Farrakhan "appears to have attributed the NOI's newfound acceptance [during the early 1970s] as a result of the lesser influence of Jewish Americans in civil rights organizations" (71), but as Marc Dollinger has shown, the Jewish American establishment had been anything but opposed to the NOI in earlier times (it was only during the late 1960s that the emerging rift between Black and Jewish causes prompted a re-evaluation). Unfortunately Gibson does not cite Dollinger, or attempt to assess the validity of Farrakhan's statement.