“A Gift from God”:
Adolescent Motherhood and Religion in Brazilian Favelas *

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ABSTRACT
This study seeks to understand how young, unmarried mothers and mothers-to-be in the favelas (shantytowns) of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, have experienced religious morality as applied to themselves and other adolescents in their communities, as well as how religious leaders grapple with the moral issue of unmarried adolescent maternity in their midst. Drawing on more than 50 interviews conducted in Rio with young mothers, Catholic and evangelical religious leaders who work with the poor, and staff members of nongovernmental organizations, this paper seeks to understand the acceptance – or even approval – that unmarried pregnant teens and adolescent mothers usually encounter, which casts doubt on whether the issue is actually posing a moral dilemma for these religious institutions.

The realities of everyday life in Rio's favelas, most prominently the ever-present specter of violence, high rates of teen motherhood, strong popular opposition to abortion, the high value accorded to motherhood, and the intense competition of the religious marketplace appear to influence the ways in which favela residents and religious leaders understand and interpret morality. More generally, this study offers an example of how religious groups working in impoverished communities throughout the world might adapt traditional moral codes to suit their circumstances.
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INTRODUCTION

At the age of 12, Tânia had become pregnant and at 18 was preparing for the birth of her third child with her boyfriend, who had recently been imprisoned. She was also a member of a local Pentecostal church and considered herself very religious. Tânia’s story is not unusual among the residents of Rio de Janeiro’s over 700 favelas (shantytowns), where such apparent contradictions between their life choices and the doctrinal codes of their religions are common among her peers.

This study seeks to understand how young, unmarried mothers and mothers-to-be like Tânia have experienced religious morality as applied to themselves and other adolescents in their communities, as well as how religious leaders grapple with the moral issue of unmarried adolescent maternity in their midst. The prevalence of unmarried pregnant teens and adolescent mothers in the congregations of many religious institutions in the favelas, and the acceptance—or even approval—which these teenagers encounter, casts doubt on whether the issue is actually posing a moral dilemma for their religious groups. More generally, this example raises the question of when and how religious groups working in impoverished communities throughout the world adapt traditional moral codes to suit their circumstances.

Below, I begin with a brief overview of the conditions of daily life in Rio’s favelas to explore how intense competition in the religious marketplace in Brazil, the prevalence of violence, and attitudes toward marriage, cohabitation, motherhood, and abortion affect the moral priorities of religious institutions in those communities. I also review literature on the uniqueness of moral codes in impoverished areas in both the United States and Brazil, as well as theories and findings regarding how religious morality has been adapted in practice to suit the needs of marginalized or underprivileged communities around the world.
BACKGROUND AND THEORY

The Religious Marketplace in Brazil

The religious marketplace in Brazil is especially dynamic. Still the largest Catholic country in the world, Brazil is also the center of gravity of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR), the world capital of spiritism, and almost certainly has the largest community of practicing Pentecostals, who constitute at least two-thirds of Brazilian Protestants (Freston 1995; Chesnut 2003).

While 95 percent of the Brazilian population identified as Catholic in 1940, that figure had fallen to 73 percent by 2003. Simultaneously, the evangelical population had grown by almost exactly that difference—roughly 20 percentage points (CPS/IBRE/FGV 2007). Many of these changes have occurred since the early 1990s and have been particularly pronounced in Rio, where only 46 percent of residents identified as Catholic in the 2000 census (IBGE), and Freston (1995) estimated that, on average, one new Pentecostal church was opening every day. Freston also pointed out that the location of these new churches throughout the city was not random; the general rule was, “the needier the district, the more churches per capita” (1995:119). This was corroborated by Pierucci and Prandi’s (2000) finding that 33 percent of Brazilian Pentecostals were “very poor,” with a monthly income of less than US$100.

In a highly competitive religious marketplace like Brazil’s, Chesnut (2003) describes churches as behaving similarly to firms through addressing members and potential members like consumers. Neo-Pentecostal1 churches, which began to appear in Rio in the 1980s, may have

1 While delineating the features of Brazilian neo-Pentecostalism can be challenging (Freston 1999), Pierucci and Prandi (2000) enumerate a few defining characteristics, including turning worship into something for the masses – in large spaces, concentrating emphatically on
been most successful in this respect, having established a reputation for adapting their religious goods to the realities of life in urban Brazil.

Part of the Catholic Church’s response to the rapidly growing number of evangelical converts was to introduce the CCR, which draws on certain techniques and doctrinal content of Pentecostalism and has expanded rapidly in Brazil (Pierucci and Prandi 2000). CCR groups, generally known as more conservative than their non-Charismatic counterparts, had traditionally attracted a primarily middle-class following. However, new tactics of recruitment demonstrate an attempt to broaden the movement’s appeal, and have shown some early signs of success, with Birman and Leite (2000) reporting recent increases in the CCR’s popularity among the young.

Chesnut concludes that the most successful “firms” in such a “market economy” are those that tailor the production and marketing of their religious goods to the realities of private life. Such realities in the favelas include the prevalence of violence and how it shapes the culture of these communities, the broad acceptance of cohabitation among unmarried couples, the high value placed on motherhood, along with the pervasiveness of teen pregnancy and the widespread opposition to abortion.

_Realities and Morality in Impoverished Urban Communities_

In many ways, the favelas of Rio, which are often under the effective control of drug-trafficking gangs, have cultural rules and regulations that distinguish them from other areas of the city. Drug-related violence is a central determinant in the shaping of that culture. In her study of life in the favelas over the course of four decades, Perlman (2006) found that 60 percent of Rio’s residents (up from 16 percent 35 years before) had come to consider violence and crime to exorcisms, as well as preaching and disseminating the Theology of Prosperity, known in the U.S. as the ‘Health and Wealth Gospel.’
be the worst aspect of living in their city. This is not surprising given that 27 percent of her respondents reported a homicide within their family. Moreover, the pervasiveness of the fear of violence had diminished opportunities for advancement, such as the transmission of information about jobs through the grapevine, which Perlman observed to have been one of the few effective means of escaping poverty during earlier periods.

Such decreasing access to legitimate modes of advancement may have contributed to the decrease in the average age at which young people began to work in drug trafficking, which fell from ages 15-16 in the early 1990s to ages 12-13 by 2000 (De Souza e Silva and Urani 2002). The increasing rate of pregnancy among younger teens suggests a feminine counterpart to this, with the birthrate among girls aged 10 to 14 having leapt 31 percent from 1993 to 1998, compared to a lower (though still alarming) increase of 19 percent among girls aged 15 through 19 (Buckley 2000).

In a 5-year study called Gravad, Heilborn et al. (2006) found that in Rio, by the ages of 18 to 19, 21 percent of women had been pregnant at least once. This figure was larger among the lower classes – a staggering 50 percent. Overall, girls aged 15-19 accounted for 20 percent of births in 2000, up from 9 percent in 1980 (Berquó and Cavenaghi 2005) while the average number of children born each year to this age group increased from 58 to 88 from 1980 to 1994 (United Nations 2004). Simultaneously, overall fertility for the country as a whole and for Rio reached historically low points following several decades of continuous decline (IBGE 2002), further drawing attention to the growth of teen-aged motherhood.²

² The highest rates of giving birth to one or more children among adolescent women ages 10-19 were among those with the least education and the lowest incomes (IBGE 2000).
Heilborn, Brandão, and Da Silva Cabral (2007) partly fault the fact that contraception is not sufficiently discussed by families or in schools to suit contemporary patterns of sexual behavior. They attribute a portion of this blame to “Christian churches of all types — both Catholic and Evangelical” for opposing “the introduction of sex education in schools, as well as the implementation of public policies that favour contraception” (2007:406). They also cite the legalization of abortion in Brazil as another neglected issue essential to the dialogue about adolescent pregnancy.

Although abortion remains illegal in Brazil, the abortion rate is roughly the same as that of the U.S. Yet Brazilian public opinion remains vehemently opposed to it. The 2006 World Values Survey (WVS) showed that 63 percent of Brazilians believe that abortion is never justifiable, with this percentage being highest among respondents in the lowest subjective social class.

The prevalence of violence and teen pregnancy are among the features that contribute to a social context in the favelas similar to that of many impoverished communities in the U.S. Other similarities include the broad acceptance of cohabitation among unmarried couples and the high value motherhood contributes to female identity.

Attitudinal data show that Brazilians assign a particularly high premium to motherhood. Among the 35 nations included in the 2002 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), Brazil had the highest percentage of respondents who thought that watching children grow up was “life’s greatest joy,” with 91 percent strongly agreeing with that statement. Likewise, 63 percent of Brazilians strongly agreed that people who do not have children “lead empty lives,” a
percentage that increased steadily by category as respondents’ level of education decreased, suggesting that parenthood has particularly high value among the lower classes.

In his research in a favela in northeastern Brazil, Neuhouser (1998) concluded that becoming a mother was a way for an adolescent to gain respect and autonomy, observing that regardless of age, an adolescent girl would become a woman with first sexual intercourse. Since birth control was seldom used, this transition was signaled by pregnancy. Similarly, Fernandez-Kelly’s (1994) research among teen mothers in a poor neighborhood in Baltimore and Anderson’s (1999) study of an inner-city ghetto in Philadelphia both showed that motherhood had become a rite of passage to adulthood for many girls.

Postulating one reason for the growth in teen motherhood rates, Neuhouser observed that “mother” was the only positive identity available to most women and girls in urban slums. Anderson also found that his young female respondents derived a large part of their identities from the babies under their care and guidance. He points out that unlike middle-class teenagers, who take a strong interest in their future and know what a pregnancy can do to derail it, many inner-city adolescents see themselves as having few perceivable options in life, and thus little to lose by having a child out of wedlock. In fact, rather than seeing childbearing as a problem, Fernandez-Kelly's respondents expressed pride in the contributions they could make to their communities by becoming mothers.

In the São Paulo favela De Carvalho (2007) studied, his respondents also viewed having a child as an important part of ‘being somebody’ inside their communities (2007:118). All of his interviewees – 21 boys and 17 girls, none of whom had children yet – spoke of the pleasure of

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3 While 78 percent of those with no education or incomplete primary education agreed or strongly agreed, this figure was only 58 percent among those with a university degree or above.
having a child and saw parenthood as a way to achieve some permanence within a context that was marked by instability. Maternity was also seen as a cure for uncertainty and solitude.

The same themes arose among Edin and Kefalas’s (2005) respondents – single mothers in five impoverished urban areas of Pennsylvania and New Jersey – who saw having a child as an escape from loneliness, as well as an advancement into a valuable social role. Valuing motherhood as the most important role for a woman, many of the women cited the fear of not being able to fulfill this role as the reason they had not wanted to wait for marriage to have children. The authors also found that although many women dreamed of someday getting married, they did not consider it an option until they could support themselves and until their partners had jobs that would enable some level of financial and physical comfort.

The Brazilian counterparts of these women face similar challenges in terms of selecting male partners. In his ethnographic study of São Jorge, an impoverished town on Rio’s urban periphery, Burdick (1996) found that increases in male alcoholism, unemployment, and adultery were alienating more and more women from marriage altogether.

Moreover, navigating the governmental bureaucracy and understanding Brazil's complex marriage laws can be particularly prohibitive to members of the lower classes. There are three types of marriage in Brazil: Civil (legal) marriage; religious marriage (which is not legally valid); and something akin to common law marriage – after a relatively short period of time, cohabitating couples are recognized as partners by the state. In general, a relationship that lasts two to three years is considered a “stable union” under the new Brazilian Law Code, especially if the couple has children together (U.S. Embassy in Brasilia 2007).

In addition, the Catholic Church’s continued influence in Brazil meant that divorce (and thus, remarriage) remained illegal until 1977, which may have contributed to the broad acceptance of
cohabitation. Among the nations in the ISSP, Brazil had the second largest percentage of respondents (57 percent), after only Denmark, who strongly believed that it was “all right for a couple to live together without intending to get married.” In fact, in the Brazilian communities I studied, most people did not distinguish between those who were officially married and those who were cohabitating. Domestic partners were generally referred to by their significant others as ‘husband’ or ‘wife’ (esposo or esposa), regardless of their status before the law or the church. (When my respondents used the term ‘husband’ to refer to a significant other, I use it as well, but within quotation marks).

*Religious Institutions and Moral Adaptability*

The social context of the favelas and the intense competition of the religious marketplace in Brazil foster an environment in which traditional religious prohibitions on unwed motherhood appear to be rarely enforced. The emergence of locally specific moralities in such contexts may also influence how religious institutions in these communities function.

Although the Catholic Church enjoyed the status of official state religion for much of Brazil’s history, Birman and Leite (2000) found that the Church was never able to attract exclusive conversion to its doctrine or eradicate non-Christian values and practices. The Catholicism that developed in Brazil adapted to the beliefs and practices of the local population, with early Jesuit observers describing Brazil as the ‘Tropics of Sin’ (2000:272).

Two studies of Catholicism within immigrant communities in the U.S. also demonstrate its adaptability within specific contexts. Orsi (1985), who examined early Italian-American immigrants in Harlem, and Tweed (1997), who studied the Cuban diaspora in Miami, both found

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4 Church and state were officially separated in 1891, but the Church remained highly influential until the 1970s.
that the specific moral worlds of those communities shaped their members’ understandings of how their non-traditional practices did not interfere with their identification with Catholicism.

Other scholars explore how the rigid moral code yet seemingly boundless adaptability of Pentecostalism have simultaneously contributed to its global popularity. Robbins (2004) contends that as it spreads around the globe, what he dubs “Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity (P/c)” maintains a set of core doctrines that enter a multitude of “cultural contexts without losing their basic shape,” including “strict moralism” (2004:121). He believes that a “collectively policed ascetic moral code,” which forbids a range of behaviors such as drinking and drug use, fighting and aggressive displays, and extramarital sexuality, contributes to the sense of social stability P/c offers (2004:124). Yet, his central argument is that P/c should be understood as dualistic in nature; it simultaneously adapts to the variety of cultures into which it comes into contact and maintains its distinctness from them.

In Martin’s (2002) exploration of the global growth of Pentecostalism, the author depicts how it sets “absolute moral rules for the governance of the community in particular to establish sexual and marital discipline” (2002:76). But he also points out that describing it as “merely morally conservative” is to overlook the importance of ambiguity, one of the primary themes in his discussion of Latin American Pentecostalism, to the movement's success (2002:103).

Burdick (1996) observed such duality at São Jorge’s Assembly of God (AG). The church’s rules offered “a radical break with, and a concrete substitute for, the tension-ridden society of youth” (1996:119). For example, violating the prohibition on premarital sex, regarded as a very serious sin, could lead to severe discipline, with church members believing that the Holy Spirit should have been “more than enough to satisfy young people’s libidinal impulses” (1996:131). While Burdick believed that the church’s moral “rigidity” was likely contributing to its short-
term success in attracting and retaining young converts (1996:144), he also noted that the same young people who were supplying the church with its most rapidly growing base were also “smuggling into it centrifugal tendencies” that may have been leading to its “doctrinal transformation” in the long run (1996:142). Moreover, young people were already beginning to leave the AG to attend the less morally restrictive Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD), a neo-Pentecostal church, which was founded in Brazil in 1977 and has become the largest and most influential one in the country.

Indeed, Abumanssur (2002) found that Brazilian neo-Pentecostal churches were so successful largely because they aimed to identify with the culture of the environment in which their churches were located, rather than striving to distinguish themselves from the greater society, assigning little or no importance to ascetic behavior as evidence of holiness. In her comparison of the roles of different religious institutions in the lives of poor Brazilians, Mariz (1994) also concluded that neo-Pentecostal groups generally had less restrictive moral regulations than did traditional Pentecostal churches. However, she observed that even traditional Pentecostals were often speaking and behaving in ways that revealed their individual independence on moral issues, despite the stated requirement of obedience to a universal moral ethic and “the much-discussed authoritarianism of their doctrines” (1994:111).

Exploring why some men converted to evangelicalism and others did not in the violence-ridden poor communities of Caracas, Venezuela, Smilde (2007) observes that evangelical

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5 Smilde’s interviewees came from two Pentecostal churches. He described them as representative of “Evangelical men of Pentecostal tendency in large urban centers in Venezuela” (2007:233), but pointed out that they generally preferred to call themselves evangelicals, “to denote their (professed) prioritization of the Gospel” (2007:29).
converts were adopting a set of beliefs to address the challenges they faced in their everyday lives. He conceptualizes evangelical belief and practice as an “imaginative rationality,” which provides individuals with the tools to get things done by offering concepts adaptable to the constraints of their social contexts (2007:13).

The scholars discussed above offer strong evidence of moral flexibility among both secular and religious actors in poor communities. Thus, rather than being assessed on the basis of a religious prohibition on premarital sexual relations, unmarried adolescent motherhood in Brazilian favelas might be viewed in the context of the many challenges confronting residents of these communities on a daily basis.

METHODS

I traveled to Rio three times over the course of two years to conduct the ethnographic research for this study. Finding teen mothers and adult women who had been teen mothers (henceforward “former” teen mothers, or simply “mothers” to refer to both groups) was challenging. First, I had to build relationships with some of the few NGOs and religious groups that worked with them, which was facilitated by my personal contacts, primarily Brazilian academics with whom they had already worked. Then, I had to interview the girls who came to them seeking aid, or who had been recruited by the organizations themselves into their programs. I interviewed all of the mothers who were willing to speak to me at the time of my fieldwork, which included most of those participating in the programs. The first program, part of a large local NGO, was secular and targeted pregnant teens and young mothers in five favelas (“Program 1,” 13 respondents).  

6 Four of the interviews with young mothers in Program 1 were conducted by a research assistant, Elizabete Albernaz, Department of Anthropology, Museu Nacional, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.
The second program, also secular, provided job training to young mothers and mothers-to-be who had been discovered living in the streets (“Program 2,” 11 respondents). The third program offered a maternal education program for teen mothers and mothers-to-be, and was run by a global Christian NGO (“Program 3,” 5 respondents). I conducted three additional interviews of mothers unaffiliated with any of those programs, introduced to me by a religious leader in one of the communities where I conducted participant observation (two of them were members of his church, and the other was a recipient of material donations from the church).

In total, 54 semi-structured in-depth interviews were completed. Thirteen of them were with key informants – eight religious leaders (five Pentecostal pastors – two male and three female, one Episcopal priest, and two Catholic priests), four staff members of the programs mentioned above, and a doctor who worked for the government at the Ministry of Health. The remaining 38 interviews were with mothers (including six teenage mothers-to-be and 11 women who were age 20 or older at the time of our interview but had first become pregnant at age 19 or younger). Six interviews were with women who were 20 or older when they first became pregnant, but who were participating in programs for adolescent mothers, and three were with young women who did not have children, but were affiliated with the programs or the religious groups I observed. The focus of the paper is on mothers who were 19 years old or younger when they first became pregnant. However, I will quote some of the other women where they provide useful illustrations of supporting parts of my argument.

Respondents were asked a range of questions covering their childhoods, relationships with family, life in their communities, the father(s) of their children, pregnancy, motherhood, and religious ties and practices of themselves and members of their immediate families. For the purposes of this paper, I define “religious affiliation” as participation in religious rituals at a
church or spiritist center. The question I asked about frequency of religious participation was open-ended. Thus, I classify respondents as attending regularly (weekly or more for Catholics and evangelicals, biweekly or more for spiritists), irregularly (less than weekly/biweekly), or not at all. To protect the privacy of my respondents, I use pseudonyms throughout this paper.

In addition to the interviews, I also conducted participant observation. I attended lengthy services (cultos) and prayer groups in ten places of worship (four traditional Pentecostal churches, two Neo-Pentecostal churches, one Catholic church, one CCR youth prayer group, and two Umbanda [Afro-Brazilian] centers) located throughout the city (inside the favelas, just outside favelas, as well as in middle-class neighborhoods). At the three NGOs mentioned above, I observed classes, workshops, and job training, worked as a volunteer, and joined in some of the recreational and other more informal activities of the groups.

RESULTS

The realities of everyday life in Rio's favelas, most prominently the ever-present specter of violence, the prevalence of teen pregnancy, strong popular opposition to abortion, and the high value accorded to motherhood, may influence the ways in which favela residents and religious leaders understand and interpret morality. Below, I examine how religious institutions in these communities, in the context of an intensely competitive religious marketplace, adapt their moral codes when confronted with such potentially prohibitive moral challenges. I then explore their moral flexibility in practice, through the interactions between adolescent mothers and religious groups, from the perspectives of mothers and religious leaders in their communities.

7 A table summarizing the ages, ages at first pregnancy, religious affiliations, and frequency of religious participation of the mothers whom I interviewed is available on my website:

http://www.princeton.edu/~lsteele/Steele%202011%20SOR%20table.pdf
Unless otherwise specified, all of the quotations below are from the interviews I conducted. Although I do not always discuss it immediately, in introducing the mothers I sometimes include their religious affiliation(s) for illustrative purposes.

*Higher Moral Priorities: Preventing Violence and Abortion*

Violence loomed large in the lives of all of the religious leaders and mothers with whom I spoke. Several of the mothers I interviewed had watched their brothers or the fathers of their children perish from drug-related violence. In addition, the fathers of the children of several others were imprisoned for their involvement in the drug trade. Many were also concerned about the safety of their children in the areas where they lived.

My respondents also mentioned several ways in which violence and drug trafficking were intertwined with teen motherhood in their communities. For example, Enrica, a mother of three at age 20, described how girls as young as 11 or 12 years old traded their bodies for drugs, which often led to pregnancy. Another connection emerged in accounts of the prestige of bearing the child of a prominent gang member. Narcisa, age 15, who had become pregnant with her son at 13 and was fighting to convince his father to acknowledge paternity – one of her motivations for seeking spiritual support at the Pentecostal church she regularly attended – said, “if they [girls in her neighborhood] get pregnant by a drug lord, then they think they’ll get everything … That’s why they get pregnant.”

Violence seemed to permeate daily life in the communities in which these mothers lived, and also influenced teen motherhood in some more subtle ways. For example, Isadora, age 24 and the mother of two (first pregnant at 16), who was a former street child and had lost her mother at the age of 5, illustrated how the sense of volatility girls experienced in her community might contribute to their decision to have children at a young age: “If you have children later you might
get killed and not be able to watch them grow up. So, it’s better to have children early because you have a better chance of being able to see them grow up.” Isadora looked for spiritual support wherever she could find it, participating, though irregularly, at three different places of worship – Catholic, evangelical, and spiritist.

Almost all of the mothers with whom I spoke believed that violence posed a major challenge in their daily lives. Religious leaders trying to exercise influence in these communities who generally share that sentiment must choose their priorities carefully. In Latin America, religious leaders do have some record of success where many others have failed – for example, through curbing violence by negotiating ceasefires, and converting prominent gang members to their religions or convincing them to leave the world of crime.

For example, Burdick (1996) noticed that São Jorge’s AG church motivated young men to avoid violence by denouncing displays of toughness and other behaviors associated with physical aggression. And Smilde (2007) found that conversion to evangelicalism could function as one of the few effective means of withdrawal from situations of violence in poor communities in Caracas. Becoming religious was one way for young men to avoid involvement with gangs without appearing cowardly or compromising their masculinity.

When I asked Pastor Paolo, who started his own Pentecostal church in the community of Acari, which had one of the highest rates of poverty in Rio and notorious incidents of violence in its recent past, about the most rewarding aspect of his work, he told me about how the leader of a drug-trafficking gang had converted in his church. Opening their doors to those who may have committed some of the worst sins in their impoverished communities is one way religious leaders may address the violence around them. Thus, perhaps understandably, the religious
leaders I interviewed generally seemed much more concerned with preventing violence than with preventing early motherhood.

After concern about violence in their communities, the next moral priority of the pastors and priests I interviewed seemed to be preventing abortion. For example, Father Cesaro worked with Program 3 to teach family planning to teen mothers in several impoverished communities (aiming to prevent those young women from having additional children), which suggests that he found it acceptable to deviate from strict Catholic doctrine on the issues of premarital sex and birth control\(^8\) in the context of the communities where he worked. However, his opposition to abortion was steadfast: “I think the first thing we should help them [pregnant girls] with is … to do what we can so that the adolescent has the child and doesn’t get rid of it – to give life. The next issue would be to prepare them not to have another pregnancy until they are in a better position in life and have a proper family.” He specifically states that the Church’s first priority in the case of pregnant girls is preventing abortion. Only after that could he turn to the question of prevention, although he again emphasized that no matter what happened or how, abortion had to be avoided: “… it’s difficult and sometimes the same situation happens again. However, it falls to the Church to show that it can’t in any way accept abortion.” He presents abortion as the worst of all possible options – such an anathema that he prefers teaching unmarried teenagers about methods of birth control, a practice that is somewhat unusual for a Catholic priest.

In general, the mothers I interviewed seemed to agree with the majority of Brazilians and the religious leaders I interviewed – that there was no justification for abortion. Although I never directly or indirectly referred to abortion in the interviews with mothers, they raised the topic

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\(^8\) Although he emphasized that the “natural rhythm” method was still presented to their students as the preferable option.
themselves numerous times. Perhaps the reason was that many of them had already grappled
with this issue. For example, lamenting her pregnancy at 14, Joaquina, age 23, said, “I didn’t
want to get pregnant so early but I also wasn’t going to get rid of it. That’s what happens to a lot
of girls.” The low regard in which abortion is held, and the fact that it is technically illegal, may
mean that many poorer Brazilians do not even consider this option.

Moreover, many of my respondents seemed to share Father Cesaro’s religious view of it as a
grave sin. When I asked Marisa, age 17 and the mother of a newborn, about the other young
mothers at the AG church she regularly attended, she said there were many, but described how
two girls at her church, in particular, had made a very strong impression on her: “They did some
bad things – things that scared me. I see children as a gift from God, even when they’ve been
created from something that’s half wrong. These girls did something to get rid of the baby – to
end the life of the baby ... After that, they stopped coming to church because they’d let the Devil
take over.” While Marisa implies that having a child outside of wedlock could be ‘half wrong,’
this seems much less severe when contrasted with what she sees as the alternative – abortion,
which signals that the Devil has usurped control of a girl’s life. Similarly, Narcisa saw abortion
as far more morally problematic than her own pregnancy at age 13. When asked if anyone in the
church had treated her pregnancy as evidence of sinful behavior, she said: “No, the baby is an
angel in your stomach. The sin is to get rid of it.”

These representative examples from the narratives of the mothers and religious leaders I
interviewed demonstrate that they prioritize at least two moral issues over teen motherhood.
While both violence and abortion were depicted as the worst forms of evil, teen motherhood,
though understood to be a social problem by all of the religious leaders and some of the mothers,
was a less exigent concern.
The Value of Motherhood

Having a child was ultimately interpreted by many of my respondents – and their families and religious leaders – as a blessing or ‘a gift from God.’ Such reverence may be attributable, at least in part, to the social prestige provided by motherhood in the context of impoverished communities (Fernandez-Kelly 1994; Neuhouser 1998; Anderson 1999; Edin and Kefalas 2005; De Carvalho 2007).

Indeed, among my respondents, perceptions of motherhood were uniformly positive. Several mentioned how motherhood improved their status in their communities. For example, commenting on how her life had changed upon becoming a mother, Hilda, expecting her second child at age 16, said: “Everything changed. Before, everyone saw me as a child and now they see how responsible I am with my daughter – how I take care of her. They look at me as more responsible.”

Joaquina, who was mentioned above lamenting having become a mother at such a young age, had ended up living in the streets after running away from home with the father of her first child, who left her when she became pregnant. Yet she still said the following about being a mother: “It’s very good, really lovely. Being a mother is the nicest thing there is.”

Many other respondents expressed similar sentiments. In fact, the desire to have children was so great among some teens that they would even seek fertility treatment if they did not become pregnant as fast as expected, a phenomenon described by my respondents and also observed by Neuhouser (1998). Neuhouser even found that some mothers would encourage their teen daughters to become pregnant in order to gain grandchildren, thereby effectively perpetuating their own ‘mother’ (or, high-status) role after they were no longer able to have babies of their own. Two of the NGO workers I interviewed confirmed this. For example, they were particularly
concerned about Hilda, whose mother seemed pleased about her 16-year-old daughter's second pregnancy because it meant that while Hilda was busy with the newborn, she would have her daughter’s first child all to herself. Hilda confirmed this when I asked her how her mother felt about being a grandmother: “She loves it. She spends the whole day with my daughter… even more now that I’m pregnant and I can’t have her in my lap because she’s too heavy. So my mother spends the whole day with her – giving her things, adoring her.” This celebration of Hilda’s young, unmarried motherhood seems to contradict the moral rules of the Baptist church where Hilda’s mother was a dedicated member, having attended several times a week for 11 years. Hilda had attended with her until age 13 and claimed that she stopped going to church before becoming pregnant.

How Flexibility is Practiced: Relationships Between Unmarried Adolescent Mothers and Religious Institutions

All 32 of the mothers I interviewed had been affiliated with religious organizations, mostly Pentecostal or Catholic, either at the time of our interviews or in the recent past⁹ (I must re-emphasize here that although my research question was about religion, it was not a factor in the recruitment of respondents, who were selected on the basis of their young ages and their status as mothers, or expectant mothers). Twenty-three of the mothers were attending evangelical churches – 17 Pentecostal, four neo-Pentecostal, one Jehovah’s Witness, and one unspecified. Another four mothers had been involved with Pentecostal or neo-Pentecostal churches in the

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⁹ In introducing respondents, I mention their present religious affiliations. Past affiliations are listed in the Table on my website:

http://www.princeton.edu/~lsteele/Steele%202011%20SOR%20table.pdf
past. In addition, nine mothers were attending Catholic churches, and two had attended in the past. Two mothers had present spiritist (Candomblé, Umbanda, etc.) affiliations, and two had attended centers in the past. Five mothers were not attending any church or center at the time of their interviews, though they all had prior affiliations. As is evident from the fact that there were more than 32 present religious ties mentioned, several of my respondents were attending more than one place of worship at the time that I interviewed them. More than half of these mothers were involved with religious groups prior to their first pregnancies, with the majority of those having been ties to evangelical (again, primarily Pentecostal) groups.

At the same time, none of the mothers I interviewed had been officially married – in the civil or religious sense – before having children. Two women had gotten married years after becoming mothers. Another seventeen mothers were still romantically involved in varying degrees with the fathers of at least one of their children (an additional four were still receiving help with childcare from the fathers), including twelve who were cohabitating with them.

From a religious group’s perspective, when a couple is already cohabitating, a prohibition on premarital sex is probably unrealistic. And, given the prevalence and social acceptance of cohabitation in Brazil, religious groups may not consider the imposition of this sort of proscription as pragmatic. Moreover, many couples begin cohabitating when they are still too young for legal marriage, particularly if they have had a child together, and the mean age at

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10 One mother, Plácida (Program 2), age 17, was attending a Catholic Church only in preparation for the baptism of her baby, and was more extensively involved with Neo-Pentecostal churches.

11 While I do not explore this topic further in this paper, these examples of multiple religious ties contribute to conclusions of a growing body of literature (see Cornille 2002; Goosen 2007; Wuthnow 2007) – that further research is greatly needed on this topic – in Brazil and beyond.
which my respondents had first become pregnant was just over 15 years old. Fifteen of them had more than one child.

Mothers and religious leaders alike described consistently more positive than negative encounters between teen mothers and the religious institutions with which they interacted, although, according to religious leaders, Catholic and evangelical churches were distinct in some ways. Father Otávio, a Jesuit Priest with whom I spoke, believed that young mothers could expect the most positive reception in evangelical churches, where they would be told that they could repent and fight through their difficult times with the support of Jesus’ love, a belief consistent with what the evangelical leaders themselves described to me. Moreover, for evangelical leaders, if a pregnancy occurred prior to the woman joining the church, there likely would not be a moral dilemma. Those women could be seen as coming to the church to find redemption. However, the pastors and priests I interviewed were generally ambiguous about whether the non-marital childbirths of the mothers we discussed were occurring before or after these mothers had come to their places of worship.

On the other hand, Father Otávio pointed out that the Catholic Archdiocese in Rio is known for being particularly conservative, and described how it viewed adolescent mothers as the product of a morally corrupt society. However, in everyday practice, in mainstream Catholic churches, he thought that the presence of a pregnant girl might be a delicate issue rather than a huge scandal. For example, congregations of many churches were so large that pregnant girls could often go unnoticed. In contrast, he thought that in a CCR group, the pregnancy of an unmarried girl could create a major scandal, and expected that a girl in that situation would probably remove herself from the group. Amélia, one of the childless young women I interviewed, and a leader of her CCR youth group, confirmed this expectation. She recalled a
case in which a member of her group had become pregnant: “Initially, everyone was shocked. But many of us [the youth group members] visited her after the baby was born. {Interviewer: And, after that?} She stopped coming to the group meetings.”

Another factor that may be relevant to this example is that, as mentioned above, the CCR has historically attracted more of its members from the middle class, among whom teenage pregnancy is much less common than it is among the lower classes in Brazil. According to Heilborn et al.’s (2006) data, the rate of adolescent pregnancy among the lower classes in Rio is almost twice as high as it is within the middle class. Thus, a teen pregnancy might be scandalous in a CCR group from the class perspective as much as from the religious perspective.

Father Cesaro also described moral conflict among lay members of the mainstream Catholic Church regarding teen pregnancy among the lower classes, though the classes of origin of the critics were not clear. Describing how practicing Catholics in Rio viewed adolescent mothers in the Church, he mentioned differences of opinion among them regarding the provision of material aid: “Some think that the Church does important work, that this is good. Some think that helping these mothers through providing aid (dando enxoval) is facilitating them having other children... They have an opposing vision.” Apparently, some lay members of the Church believed that the Church should not even provide basic assistance, such as food, to adolescent mothers, fearing that this might encourage their morally objectionable behavior.

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12 Among women ages 20 to 24 in Rio de Janeiro (including virgins), 51 percent of those in the “very low” income bracket versus 28 percent of those in the “middle” income group had had at least one pregnancy before age 20.

13 “Enxoval para as mães,” refers to material assistance for the baby (clothes, strollers, bottles, diapers, etc.), which is a traditional form of social assistance in Brazil.
However, all of the Pentecostal religious leaders I interviewed claimed that no discrimination against young or unmarried mothers existed in their congregations. In fact, several of them used almost exactly the same words when I asked if there was such prejudice in their churches: “No. Thank God. Not here.” They would then go on to explain that this did, unfortunately, happen in some other churches.

Themes of compassion and the importance of providing aid, also part of Father Cesaro’s account, emerged in all of the narratives of the Pentecostal leaders who spoke with me. Several leaders also specifically employed religious discourse to justify the compassionate treatment of young or unmarried mothers within their churches. For example, Pastor Laura, the leader of the women’s group at an AG church in a favela on the outskirts of Rio that was not receiving any services from the government and did not have any other major churches, emphasized that young or unmarried mothers who came to their church were “... seen not as women to be pitied, but as women finding courage in Christ, even without a husband. They are working, fighting for their children to have a different life, despite the community we live in.”

Regarding the question of religious morality, Pentecostal leaders also tended to sidestep the question of judgment, and in some cases pointed out that it could be left to God. In response to a question about whether congregants ever raised the issue of the immorality of young unmarried mothers attending her church, Pastor Gabriela, of another AG church, which attracts worshipers from several nearby favelas, explained how these mothers were actually welcomed by her congregation and offered support. She said that if church members had doubts about their morality, “... and brought these questions within the walls of the church, and judged them, I wouldn’t support that. Who are we to judge each other?” Rather than “sinners,” she saw these mothers as “girls who need advice, affection, care, and direction.”
Pastor Paolo also emphasized empathy, not judgment, in the face of adversity, describing how members of his church prayed and engaged with young unmarried mothers to help them find peace, adding, “We leave the question of morality alone because we all live here and we know how difficult it is. The difficulty starts here.”

When I asked Pastor Eduardo, the head pastor at Pastor Laura’s church, if questions about morality ever arose regarding young or unmarried mothers in his church, he also cited how community conditions fostered a need for compassion, saying, “You see that people go to church already bombarded by problems – their marriages destroyed, their families broken. So, we have to consider how much strength it took just for them to face that.” He expressed sympathy regarding the many challenges confronting modern adolescents, but pointed out that the church continued teaching that marriage should precede sexual relations: “… this is what we teach. Now, it’s difficult, because everyone has a unique situation, and there’s no way around that, right? There’s the teaching – it’s difficult, very difficult.”

This need for flexibility given community conditions extended into the composition of the church's leadership. Pastor Eduardo expressed some discomfort about the fact that one of his female pastors was a single mother herself, acknowledging that “one of the principles for women to become pastors is that they be married.” But again, he pointed to the realities of their church's neighborhood: “We generally try to avoid having pastors who are single mothers. But, we have 40 single mothers in the church, understand?”

Regarding how to treat young unmarried mothers in their churches, the overarching theme expressed by religious leaders was compassion, given the trying circumstances of the communities in which they worked. In the cases described above, all of the leaders appear to have adapted to the less than ideal circumstances of their neighborhoods, leading them to
morally privilege assistance to those in need, and accepting human fallibility – perhaps leaving judgment to God – over chastising sexual digressions.

As the above accounts from religious leaders would predict, many mothers encountered welcoming, supportive, and versatile environments, rather than doctrinally inflexible ones. Beyond receiving material support, which, as implied above, could be fairly easily justified by most religious groups in terms of helping those in need, some respondents even found sources of affirmation for their circumstances. For example, Viviane, a life-long Pentecostal at age 18, was imminently expecting the birth of her first child with her boyfriend, with whom she planned to live, but not officially marry, when their baby was born. She described a sisterhood among the women of her church, who helped not just her, but all of the pregnant girls with donations of clothing, or whatever else they needed.

Viviane not only seemed unaware (or unconcerned) that she might be committing a ‘sin’ according to the doctrinal moral code of her religion, but she instead had situated herself in terms of successes and failures within her local cultural context, in which she saw herself as having delayed motherhood to a late age. She said, “I had a childhood. Not all kids have a good childhood … but, mine was. I took full advantage of it – having a child a little later than the majority of girls. These days, at 13 or 14 they’re pregnant. So, I think I took advantage of my childhood.” Further, though she had not married, she remained unconcerned regarding her own situation, although she did express some awareness of the distinction between cohabitation and marriage, from the church’s point of view. She pointed out that her mother was about to be officially married for the first time in her life so that she could be admitted into the church sisters’ group.
Likewise, rather than judgment, Flávia, age 16 and the mother of a 5-month-old, who had grown up attending a Catholic Church and had been invited to join a Pentecostal church when she was pregnant – and continued to attend both churches regularly – found encouragement from her Pentecostal congregation: “{Interviewer: When you were pregnant ... the church has this thing about getting married before having sexual relations, right?} No. {Interviewer: But they give you some type of advice relating to motherhood?} To forget [the baby's] father. [...] They saw that he wasn’t even helping with money.” And, from Narcisa’s perspective, no major moral problems threatened her presence at her Pentecostal church: “{Interviewer: For the church, to have sex you have to be married, right?} Get married at 15? Even a priest wouldn’t accept that ... {Interviewer: But, did anyone make you feel bad? Like say that you should be married?} No.”

Narcisa and Flávia both declare that their Pentecostal churches actually do not prohibit premarital sex. Some of the mothers may not have been informed of certain behavioral restrictions. But Narcisa does, in fact, reveal some awareness of restrictions on sexual behavior later, citing behavioral reasons for delaying her official conversion at the Pentecostal church she had recently begun attending: “I’m not evangelical now because I like to go clubbing, to go for pagode, and evangelicals don’t like this, right? ... But I go to church to receive the blessing – even though I go out and kiss people on the lips, too ... The crentes say you can only ‘do it’ after marriage, but I don’t want that!”

In this case, although she described how some aspects of her sexuality were incompatible with the moral code of the church she attended, she still never mentioned the ostensibly

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14 Pagode is a type of popular Brazilian music related to samba.

15 Literally, “believers,” the term crente is used commonly throughout Latin America to refer to evangelicals.
problematic fact that she was an unmarried 15-year-old mother. Perhaps she believed that this ‘sin’ and others would be forgiven if she did officially convert. Or perhaps she was following a moral code that suited her. This would be consistent with Mariz’s (1994) finding that Pentecostals often expressed independence regarding moral issues, and Spencer-Arsenault’s (1999) study of Catholic women in Canada. She described people like Narcisa, Flávia, and Viviane as, ‘choosing agents’ who accept and incorporate into their lives the teachings which they find relevant and disregard those they do not (1999:13).

At the same time, the comments above from Pastors Eduardo, Gabriela, and Paolo suggest that there is little if any chastisement for sexual digressions in their churches. They all state that the conditions of their communities rendered life sufficiently challenging that they wanted to offer support before judgment. However, this behavior on the part of church leaders is also consistent with Chesnut’s description of how successful religious institutions in competitive marketplaces tailor their religious goods to the realities of private life.

While only five of my respondents mentioned the expectation or actual personal experience of moral judgment from religious groups regarding their maternity, notably, all of them had stopped attending. They may have been asked to leave, or may have removed themselves in anticipation of that (perhaps having seen that happen to others). However, their departures can also be seen as a vivid illustration of why religious groups in a competitive religious marketplace may not ostracize teen mothers – for fear that they will lose members.

As demonstrated above, most mothers simply crafted their moral codes from the various influences in their daily lives and seemed to encounter little, if any, resistance in doing so. For example, when I asked Marisa, quoted above describing abortion as the work of the devil, how her life had changed after converting to Pentecostalism three years prior to our interview, she
said, “It changed a lot. I stopped doing the ‘wrong things’ (coisas erradas) that I was doing. My way of thinking changed.” Although she does recognize certain moral boundaries, she did not seem to view as ‘wrong’ being an unmarried mother at the age of 17 (she had also recently begun living with the baby’s father, to whom she was not married), perhaps because she was vehemently opposed to abortion, consistent with the beliefs of her community and her church.

In total, only a handful of references from respondents demonstrated any awareness of the discrepancies between their lifestyles and the moral codes of their churches. Cíntia, age 22 and the mother of a 3-year-old, had grown up attending a Pentecostal church every Saturday and Sunday with her mother and continued attending a local AG church regularly on her own. At the time of our interview, she was asking God for help with the father of her child, who had been sent to prison one month earlier. Of all my respondents, she offered the most explicit link between her religiosity and her behavior, though still excluding the issue of her maternity:

“{Interviewer: Do you consider yourself evangelical? Converted?} I would say that I was evangelical, but today no. It’s not the right time to say that I’m evangelical. {Interviewer: What would need to change in your life from now for you to say that you’re evangelical?} My clothes, my words … I think it’s this. I’d need to attend more often … wear more modest clothing, stop cursing … that’s it … serving God directly through the rules.” Other respondents acknowledged certain problems associated with their lifestyles by their churches’ – their clothing, their cursing, their partying, though never their extra-marital pregnancies. And they did not allow these discrepancies to prevent them from attending the churches regularly.

Accounts of moral leniency and flexibility were far more common among both the mothers and religious leaders I interviewed than experiences of intolerance, enforcement (or even the expectation of the enforcement) of fixed moral rules. In contemporary Brazil, young women may
not only choose their own faiths, but may also decide which principles of those faiths can pragmatically be assimilated into their lives. Moreover, they apparently encounter little resistance during this process from their religious leaders or co-congregants.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Through a study of adolescent motherhood in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, this paper has explored how religious groups working in impoverished communities adapt traditional moral codes to suit their circumstances. Consistent with the evidence presented by Neuhouser (1998) and De Carvalho (2007) from Brazil, and Anderson (1999), Edin and Kefalas (2005), and Fernandez-Kelly (1994) from the U.S., I find that the challenging circumstances of these impoverished communities have led residents to develop their own social "prescriptions and proscriptions" (Anderson:9-10).

In such contexts, religious groups accordingly exhibit a marked degree of flexibility. Other scholars have written about how both Catholicism (Orsi 1985; Tweed 1997) and Pentecostalism (Martin 2002; Robbins 2004), the dominant religions in Brazil and among my respondents, have been adapted to suit the needs of specific constituencies. In the favelas of Rio, where competition in the religious marketplace is intense, adolescent motherhood is a common occurrence, and religious leaders feel compelled to prioritize preventing violence and abortion over chastising sexual digressions, such adaptation almost appears inevitable. My research illustrates this phenomenon through demonstrating the acceptance – or even approval – that religious groups exhibit toward the unmarried pregnant teens and adolescent mothers attending their places of worship.

One question in need of further research is whether or not these religious groups have become more flexible with their moral codes over time. Burdick's (1996) observations from an
AG church near Rio revealed much less flexible attitudes toward sexuality less than twenty years ago. Yet more than half of the mothers I interviewed were involved with the AG or other traditional Pentecostal churches. Mariz's (1994) research during about the same time period also showed that there was discernible moral rigidity among Pentecostals regarding sexual behavior. She found that when a Pentecostal single woman became pregnant, she was expelled from her church, although she could then convert to another Pentecostal denomination if she decided to restrict her sexual life. Mariz thus suggested that the moral doctrine of Pentecostalism could have the effect of decreasing the rate of single motherhood.

This topic of religion as a potential deterrent to teen motherhood also requires further research. At least in terms of age of sexual debut, Regnerus’s (2007) data from the U.S. show that it is no lower among Catholics or evangelicals than among non-religious adolescents. On the other hand, using data from the 2000 Brazilian Census, McKinnon et al. (2008) found that associating with some religious groups may have been helping to delay teen motherhood. Specifically, the odds of ever having had a live birth for adolescent women belonging to the AG, Baptist, other mainline Protestant, and other Pentecostal churches were about one-third less than for Catholics, after adjusting for individual-level and community-level controls, with the one clear exception to the effect of Protestantism being the IURD. Girls belonging to that church had fertility rates much higher than those of Catholics. Among my respondents, however, only four had ever been affiliated with the IURD, while 15 reported present or prior ties to the AG.

In total, 19 of the 32 mothers I interviewed were involved with religious groups prior to their first pregnancies, with 15 of those having had ties to evangelical (primarily Pentecostal) groups. Four of the mothers had switched from one evangelical church to another after having their children, but the causes for this were not necessarily related to morality (for example, at least two
of them had switched because they moved to live with the fathers of their children). Mariz had noticed that the Christian Base Communities (CEBs)\(^\text{16}\) she studied were more likely to treat sexual morality as a private issue – a middle-class preoccupation whose values its leaders hesitated to impose on the poor, preferring to let them define their own sexual morality. My research suggests that such a laissez-faire attitude toward sexual morality may now be the norm among many or most of the religious groups working with the poor.

Even when churches in Rio’s favelas may view a non-marital pregnancy as having resulted from a moral digression – extra-marital sexual relations – the continuation of the pregnancy can be seen to represent an even more important moral decision – not to get an abortion. Thus, the initial immoral act potentially offers the digresser a new opportunity to prove her morality, through avoiding the much graver sin of terminating her pregnancy.

In addition, unlike the issues of violence, drug-trafficking, and abortion, while adolescent motherhood may be considered a social problem by Brazilians in general (Heilborn, Brandão, and Da Silva Cabral 2007), and unmarried motherhood a violation of the traditional moral doctrines of some religious groups (Mariz 1994; Burdick 1996; Martin 2002; Robbins 2004), ultimately, in a context in which child-rearing holds particularly high value (ISSP 2002; Neuhouser 1998; De Carvalho 2007), this ‘problem’ at least produces some positive results – new life and motherhood, with children regarded as ‘a gift from God.’

\(^{16}\) Mariz points out that there is no clear definition of CEBs, which were an attempt by the progressive Catholic church of the 1960s to reach the lower sectors of Latin American society, but defines them herself as "Catholic groups of poor people that attempt, through meditation and prayer, to foster a view of religion that is socially and politically engaged" (1994:17).
REFERENCES


