

CONSIDERATIONS FOR AN APOLOGY FOR AFRODESCENDANTS IN BRAZIL

Fernando Pinheiro

I am not Black, but my ancestors are. Had I been of age before 1978, I would not have received the priesthood. I think about this as I consider the history of racism in Brazil. The priesthood ban in Brazil was an attempt to continue American racial segregation in a country that was once a colony of exploitation and ravaged by slavery for over three hundred years. Even after the abolition of slavery, racism was present in the Brazilian social structure. However, it is important to point out that Brazilian racism was different from other known experiences, such as South African apartheid or the situation of the Black population in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, in which racism was explicit and institutionalized by laws and official practices. While institutional racism was prohibited in Brazil, social racism was not. The damage caused by this practice in all its aspects left a lasting mark.

At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, racial theories from Europe arrived in Brazil. They were accepted in the various scientific, teaching, and research institutions of the national elite, constituted by the white dominant classes. Brazilian president Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945) instituted a project to whiten the nation, which wandered like a ghost for many years in the minds of supporters of eugenic ideals, including policies that prevented certain ethnic groups from receiving a visa to enter the country.

When the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came to Brazil in the late 1920s, it restricted its activities to the Germanic colonies. According to population data from the end of the nineteenth century, there were around eight million Black people and their mestizajes out of

just over fourteen million inhabitants in Brazil.¹ Before going to South America to open the Brazilian Mission in 1935, mission president Rulon S. Howells met with J. Reuben Clark of the First Presidency. Clark told him: “You know, I’m quite concerned over the problems that you will have with the Negro in Brazil, because they are so dominant.” Clark had made a stop for one day in Rio de Janeiro while on a diplomatic mission to South America. He told Howells that when he disembarked from the boat, “all [he] could see there was black people.” Clark continued: “The problem you’ll have with the gospel and the Negro race—I don’t know what,”—President Clark paused and shook his head before continuing—“I don’t know what you’ll do.”²

Mission president John A. Bowers, who succeeded Howells in Brazil, answered Clark’s concern with a clear policy on racial segregation: “We immediately started to segregate the people we went to.”³ But further clarity was needed. In the 1950s, the missionary lessons for proselyting “were greatly improved” to “quickly bring investigators to a desire to repent, pray for a testimony and be baptized.”⁴ In Brazil, the next mission president, Asael T. Sorensen, created another lesson specifically to address the issue of race, teaching that “God has revealed that blacks cannot yet receive the priesthood.”⁵ This meant that they often did not teach anyone suspected of African ancestry. Sorensen commented, “So when they find a Negro family then just encourage

1. “Território brasileiro e povoamento—negros—população negra no Brasil,” Brasil 500 anos (website), <https://brasil500anos.ibge.gov.br/territorio-brasileiro-e-povoamento/negros/populacao-negra-no-brasil.html>.

2. Rulon S. Howells, interview by Gordon Irving, Salt Lake City, UT, Jan. 18–19, 1973, transcript, 19, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

3. John A. Bowers, interview by Gordon Irving, Salt Lake City, UT, Apr. 25, 1974, transcript, 54, Church History Library.

4. Asael T. Sorensen, Sr., “A Personal History,” unpublished manuscript (Salt Lake City, UT, 2001), 139, Church History Library.

5. Brazil North Mission (1970–1974), Lineage lesson, December 1970, Church History Library.

them to study the Bible and to be good Christians, and then they go on to the next house.”⁶

Church missionaries continued to segregate based on “lineage” when they were sent to the Brazilian northeast in the 1960s. This region is known for its beautiful beaches with warm seas, rivers, historic cities, and its accentuated racial mixing. Mission president William G. Bangerter blessed his missionaries by saying that “it was an ‘awesome responsibility’ preaching to a corrupted people which we have to avoid, seeking the good souls—but are to go the corrupt when necessary.”⁷ This meant that missionaries did occasionally teach those with African ancestry, but focused on the “good souls” of white people as their primary responsibility.

Anthropologist Nádia Amorim explains the damage that the prohibition of the priesthood to afrodescendants caused. While studying racial dynamics within the LDS Church in the coastal city of Maceió (Alagoas) in the 1970s, she recorded some testimonies from white

6. Brazil North Mission (1970–1974), Lineage lesson, December 1970, Church History Library.

7. Michael M. Norton, journal dated Aug. 17, 1958–Mar. 21, 1961, April 1, 1960, 189, Brazilian Mission papers, 1958–1961, Church History Library. Soon after, one of the first missionaries assigned to northeastern Brazil, Michel M. Norton, wrote in his diary: “This afternoon we got a good look at the city, and were surprised to find 70–80% of the people with full or mixed negro blood.” Norton, diary, April 3, 1960, 190. Bowers recorded a narration of a young Black man who was baptized at the time: “We preached the gospel to a light-skinned Negro man who was very interested, and we felt that we were going to have a problem. But he was such a fine man that we kept on preaching the gospel to him. He readily accepted and was baptized. And when it became known among his Catholic friends they started to chide him about becoming a ‘Mormon.’ It got so bad that he couldn’t take the persecution that his friends gave him, and his wife too. [The elders] wanted to know what to do. We told him that he’d have to do the best he could. He said he had a testimony of the gospel, but he just couldn’t stand the chiding any more. So we lost that man.” See John A. Bowers, interview by Gordon Irving, Salt Lake City, UT, Apr. 25, 1974, transcript, 54, Church History Library.

Church members about the ban on priesthood. One member said, “They, black people, need our support. Poor people, they will have their time. Your situation is sad. But what can we do? With our guidance, if you are humble, you will progress. The Church is inspired. You know what you do. As much as we regret it, we cannot face it.”⁸ One American missionary warned a member about how to share the teachings of the Church in this way: “Be careful, sister, in your choice of investigators. Look for good-looking people; clean, well-cared for, that have no ‘lineage.’ It’s not that hard to notice when it exists. The traits, in general, reveal it. Not just the color. For being the hair, the lips, the nose. It’s just that it’s no use bringing to the Church, *now*, individuals who bear it. Since they cannot *yet* receive the priesthood, it’s better to avoid them.”⁹ Other testimonies appear throughout Amorim’s text, some members of the Church affirming a hope in the belief of the millennium, when “the blacks, . . . will have their time to join the Church and know the restored Gospel.”¹⁰ Testimonials from less active members were also recorded:

A gentleman, already priesthood holder: I started to disagree on several points that I didn’t understand well before. They hadn’t explained it to me. I got bored. You see, the “*problem of lineage*” . . . *here in Brazil, the Church will always have this problem.*

A young woman, high school student: *The Church selects its chosen ones.* Look what they did to [name omitted] . . . so good, with so much faith, but they didn’t want it. Just because it has “*lineage*.” All of this was pissing me off.

Another gentleman, also a priesthood holder: It’s hard to find people who can join the Church. You know how it is: *Brazilians, especially here in the Northeast, always have a “lineage.”* If you choose how they want, the Church does not grow. And I don’t know if that’s fair. . . .¹¹

8. Nádia Fernanda Maia de Amorim, *Os Mórmons em Alagoas: religião e relações raciais* (São Paulo: FFLCH/USP, 1986), 104.

9. Amorim, *Os Mórmons em Alagoas*, 105.

10. Amorim, *Os Mórmons em Alagoas*, 106.

11. Amorim, *Os Mórmons em Alagoas*, 111–12.

These reports show how the church's teachings on racial lineage alienated many members and became a source of internal dissatisfaction.

There are numerous examples of how these teachings and practices divided church members and even families. Researcher Mark L. Grover described the unfortunate experience of a young man who was denied the Aaronic priesthood during a sustaining vote at a branch conference. The missionaries who raised their hands in opposition explained: "During visits with the boy's family they had noticed that two younger brothers exhibited some negroid physical features. Even though the young man was fair-skinned with brown wavy hair, it was not uncommon for African ancestry to show itself in one member of a family and not in another. If their suspicions were correct, he would be ineligible to hold the Mormon priesthood because of African ancestry."¹² After an investigation by local leaders and missionaries, they discovered "evidence of black ancestors" for the young man. He "was informed of the decision," that "the priesthood could not be given to any of the children in the Family."¹³

Like this young man, many discovered their ancestry after baptism and many after they had been ordained. One member had joined the Church in São Paulo in 1963. Three months after his baptism, he was called as branch president in that city. As time went on, he observed that genealogy was not being practiced satisfactorily in the unit. With a great willingness to serve in religion, he decided to be an example to research his family tree. What he found was not pleasant. "At a determined point, I encountered a datum, a document, that demonstrated that I had [African] lineage. I looked at that thing and said, 'Ok, this

12. Mark L. Grover, "Religious Accommodation in the Land of Racial Democracy: Mormon Priesthood and Black Brazilians," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17, no. 3 (1984): 23–24.

13. Grover, "Religious Accommodation," 24.

is not good,” he recalled.¹⁴ The mission president Wayne M. Beck described the situation of this man:

There’s one particular case where we had a branch president who was an excellent man, one of the best branch presidents we had. He came to my office one day very upset. He had received some information from his family and had some pictures where he claimed his grandmother was black. We told him maybe the wise thing to do was to withdraw his hand. “Withdrawing his hand” meant that he wouldn’t ordain people and that we would release him as branch president so that he wouldn’t be embarrassed as a result of it. And so that’s what he did. He withdrew his hand and he was released as branch president.¹⁵

When asked if it was common for members to discover they had African ancestry, Beck responded, “Yes. Yes, that happened on numerous occasions, and we tried to treat it just as graciously as we possibly could, because he can’t help it.”¹⁶

Scholars who have analyzed these stories confirm just how common they were. Grover recorded that the priesthood issue “was much more than an occasional embarrassment or a matter for theological debate. It was a very personal issue which had to be confronted often.” In addition, there was a permanent effort by members to observe “this policy which openly discriminated against family members, friends, and occasionally themselves. It was also a source of conflict between local members and missionaries and many times resulted in limited growth and development for the Church.”¹⁷

The priesthood ban also affected interracial marriages, which have been common in Brazil since colonial times and are a source of pride for

14. Eduardo Alfieri Soares Contieri, interviewed by F. LaMond Tullis, 1976, typescript, 6–7, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

15. Wayne M. and Evelyn M. Beck, interviewed by Gordon Irving, 1974, typescript, 64, Church History Library.

16. Wayne M. and Evelyn M. Beck, interview, 65.

17. Grover, “Religious Accommodation,” 24.

many Brazilians, who view them as a reflection of the country's cultural and ethnic richness. Miscegenation is a fundamental part of Brazilian identity and is celebrated in culture, music, cuisine, and many aspects of the daily life of Brazilians. During his leadership of the Brazilian Mission, Asael T. Sorensen, taught the congregation "the Importance of the Priesthood bearers teaching their children to marry those who have proven their genealogy that they might not lose their priesthood by intermarrying those who have the Blood of Cain."¹⁸ Many Latter-day Saints sought to follow Sorensen's guidance, apparently without any resistance. Nevertheless, eventually, interracial marriage families emerged in the church. The children in these relationships face particular challenges. Although white fathers might receive the priesthood, their sons from a Black mother would not have the same privilege. There are reports of Black mothers who cried when they saw their children growing up in the Church and who would not bless or distribute the sacrament.¹⁹

There is a vast record of experiences, in addition to those cited in this essay, that justify a formal apology for racism from the Church. The way that these teachings perpetuated anti-Black racism among investigators, members, and families calls for a reckoning. Further, the history of these practices continues to negatively affect the Church and its members. Many Brazilian members do not know the Church's history. When they do learn about the priesthood ban, it can demotivate or weaken them. Their concerns can get worse when the Church does not try to repair the past in some way or when they decide to remain silent.

An apology from the Church can make a difference for all Black people of African descent, especially in Brazil. Apologizing for the banning of the priesthood demonstrates recognition and responsibility for inappropriate, offensive, and harmful behavior that has affected untold

18. Brazil São Paulo North Mission manuscript history and historical reports, 1927–1977, Part 1, 1956 January–1956 December, 329, Church History Library.

19. Fernando Pinheiro, *Gravação de vídeo da história da Igreja em Alagoas* (video recording of interviews with members about the history of the Church in Alagoas), 2014–2016, Church History Library.

numbers of people and generations. Furthermore, it can be a way of expressing sincere remorse and a desire to repair the deep damage done to these individuals.

An energetic apology response from the Church could also beneficially affect youth and new converts, two groups that have always been a concern for the Church. Fortunately, many young people today are increasingly aware of racial issues and the importance of promoting equality and social justice. They tend to be more open to diversity and more engaged in fighting racism compared to previous generations. Somehow, these characteristics can also be found in potential adult individuals to become members of the Church. An official apology would close the subject, bringing an end to it. Making a new direction in the history of the Church would be ideal for the younger members, both in age and in faith.

Admitting a mistake and genuinely apologizing can be an effective solution to resolving the issue, and doing so would allow the Church to rebuild the trust that has been undermined by its inappropriate behavior in the past. In addition, the institution will show that it values the memory of those who have been denied the priesthood and that it is ready for an open and constructive dialogue.

FERNANDO PINHEIRO DA SILVA FILHO is a Brazilian who graduated in History from the Federal University of Alagoas (UFAL) and holds a master's degree in Cultural History from the same institution. His research focused on aspects of the early years of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Brazil. He is currently a doctoral candidate at the Rural University of Pernambuco (UFRPE), where he will continue with further studies of the Church in the Brazilian territory. He is co-author of *Campo Bom: História dos Santos dos Últimos Dias no Rio de Janeiro* (A fine field: History of Latter-day Saints in Rio de Janeiro). Also, he is the founder and administrator of the social media group História dos Santos dos Últimos Dias no Brasil (History of Latter-day Saints in Brazil), which has more than twenty-eight thousand members. A history teacher, he lives in Maceió, Alagoas, with his family.