

John of God's sexual assault arrest tarnishes Brazil's spiritist movement - Religion News Service

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SAO PAULO, Brazil (RNS) — For decades John of God attracted crowds with his alleged faith healing powers, at first capitalizing on local spiritualist beliefs but soon riding the wave of New Age spirituality to cater to personalities such as Oprah Winfrey and performance artist Marina Abramovic.

In December, John of God, whose real name is João Teixeira de Faria, was arrested after being accused by hundreds of women of sexual crimes perpetrated during healing sessions.

Since the 1970s, Faria, now 76, had performed thousands of “spiritual surgeries,” a technique in which the medium supposedly channels a spiritual physician, who removes the illness from the patient. His approach, which also combined meditation, prayers, crystal healing, herbs and bathing in waterfalls, drew a steady stream of the suffering, disabled and merely curious from as far away as Europe and Australia to Abadiania, a small city about 70 miles southwest of Brasilia.

Victims say Faria would ask a woman attending one of his gatherings to follow him to his office. “The spiritual entities selected you for healing,” he would reportedly tell them. Claiming that physical contact was part of the procedure, Faria would abuse them, reports say, counting on his power as a local celebrity to keep them quiet.

Although the rumors of Faria’s sexual assaults are not new – the Australian version of “60 Minutes” mentioned them in 2014 — the case erupted Dec. 7, when a group of 10 women reported abuses on a TV show presented by Brazilian journalist Pedro Bial.



Spiritual healer João Teixeira de Faria, better known as John of God, arrives at the Casa de Dom Inacio de Loyola in Abadiania, Brazil, on Dec. 12, 2018. More than 600 women have come forward to accuse the spiritual healer of sexual abuse. Photo by Marcelo Camargo/Agencia Brasil

Days later police opened an investigation and solicited complaints via a dedicated email account. On Dec. 16, Faria was arrested after a newspaper revealed that he had taken almost \$10 million from his bank accounts and financial investments. Money, firearms and emeralds were found at his house.

At this point, more than 600 women — varying in age from 8 to 67 — have accused Faria of sexual assault. One of them, Dalva Teixeira, is his daughter.

Faria is the product of a uniquely Brazilian combination of religious traditions — popular versions of Roman Catholicism in which saints almost assumed the status of deities, as well as the African-Brazilian Umbanda and Candomblé faiths, and spiritism, the belief that the dead live on as spirits and communicate with the living.

That mix was represented in Faria's center in Abadiania, Casa de Dom Inacio de Loyola. Founded in the late 1970s, it is named in honor of St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus and one of the spiritual entities Faria claims to channel. Before that, Faria had been a *babalaô*, the leader of an Umbanda spiritual center.

"John of God is a Roman Catholic and a devotee of [St. Rita of Cascia](#). Everybody wears white clothes at the center, which is an Umbanda tradition, as well as bathing in waterfalls," said Cristina Rocha, director of the Religion and Society Research

Center at the Western Sydney University and author of the book “John of God: The Globalization of Brazilian Faith Healing.”



John of God, left, on stage after performing a “psychic surgery” at the Casa de Dom Inacio de Loyola in Abadiania, Brazil, on June 14, 2006. Photo courtesy of Creative Commons

This amalgam of faiths at the Casa is likely why the Brazilian Spiritist Federation – the main organization of the spiritist movement in Brazil that guides thousands of centers in the country – never endorsed Faria’s activities.

As soon as the assault scandal came to light, BSF released a statement to clarify that the spiritist movement “does not recommend the activities of mediums that work on an individual basis.”

Despite BSF’s attempts to distance itself from Faria, “surgery” performed by a medium embodying a spirit is basically a spiritist practice, according to Sandra Stoll, author of a pre-eminent study on Brazilian spiritism.



Brazil is the largest country in South America. Map courtesy of Creative Commons

The idea of healing through magical rituals has long been a part of Brazilian folk beliefs, going back to the country's founding. "Although a Roman Catholic country, there was a lack of priests and people developed unorthodox practices," said Stoll. Cults grew up around the Virgin Mary and other Catholic icons, who people believed had miraculous power to cure them.

But Brazil's brand of spiritism is derived from writings of a mid-19th-century French educator, Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, whose pen name was Allan Kardec. Impressed by the phenomena made popular by the North American spiritualist movement, such as table-turning and Ouija boards, Kardec developed a quasi-scientific belief system that was imported to Brazil mainly by law and medicine students returning home from studying in France, according to Augusto Dias de Araujo, a professor at the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology in Paraíba and an expert on spiritism.

Spiritism's emphasis on healing ran it into trouble with the medical establishment as well as religious authorities, and spiritism soon changed its focus to social welfare

and charitable work. Healing became only a portion of the work done in spiritist centers.

“The spiritist movement promoted homeopathic treatments and the creation of dozens of psychiatric hospitals,” said Alexander Moreira-Almeida, director of the Research Center in Spirituality and Health at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora School of Medicine.

In the 20th century, mediums came to enjoy significant social acceptance. Francisco Candido Xavier, known as Chico Xavier, who died in 2002, was modern spiritism’s most important architect, Stoll said. He made Catholic sainthood, and the Catholic religious vows of celibacy, poverty and obedience, the model of spiritist virtue. Xavier’s books detailing spiritist values and beliefs sold millions of copies, and he often appeared on TV.

His popularity helped establish spiritism as one of the chief religions in Brazil, with at least 3.8 million adherents in 2010, according to Brazil’s Institute of Geography and Statistics. The BSF estimates that the belief has as many as 40 million sympathizers among the largely Catholic population.

Faria is the most prominent spiritual surgeon since Jose Pedro de Freitas, known as Ze Arigo. Without any medical training — he claimed to channel a German doctor who died in World War I named Dr. Fritz — Arigo used knives and switchblades to remove tumors and cysts from patients without sterilization or anesthesia. He died in 1971.

During healing sessions in Abadiania, visitors choose to undergo visible or invisible surgeries. The invisible ones, according to Faria, are conducted by spiritual entities while the person is meditating or doing other therapeutic activities. The visible procedures are performed by Faria himself.

Channeling a spiritual physician, he cuts the patient’s skin with a scalpel or scissors or sticks an instrument in their nostril. Claiming to have removed malignant tumors (or other illnesses), he prescribes passion flower pills — sold at the Casa’s pharmacy — and tells the patient he or she will be cured.



Spiritual healer João Teixeira de Faria, better known as John of God, arrives at the Dom Inacio Loyola House in Abadiania, Brazil, on Dec. 12, 2018. More than 600 women have come forward to accuse the spiritual healer of sexual abuse. Photo by Marcelo Camargo/Agencia Brasil

Moreira-Almeida, who has studied Faria's surgeries, confirmed that no antiseptic or anesthetic measures were taken – despite the unbearable pain that should accompany some procedures, such as, in one case, scraping the cornea with a kitchen knife. Tissues taken to the lab were found to be compatible with the parts of the body from which they were removed, but most showed no sign of pathology. "He never reached body cavities, usually getting only to the adipose tissue," said Moreira-Almeida.

So far, Faria is facing two lawsuits involving nine alleged victims of sexual assault, as well as charges of illegal possession of firearms and coercion of a witness. Police are still investigating him on money laundering. Several claims of assault may never be taken to court due to statutes of limitation. Sexual offenses carry prison sentences of up to 15 years.

Faria's arrest, meanwhile, caused concern in Abadiania, where the local economy thrives on the hotels, restaurants and tour guides serving the thousands who visit the Casa annually.

"The reaction of some tour guides was to dissociate John of God from the spiritual entities he channeled," said Rocha. "They are reasoning that the Casa continues to be a holy place."

But Stoll argues that Faria's fall represents a deeper crisis for the spiritist movement. "He failed to meet the moral code established by Chico Xavier," he said, which is based on renouncing the world.

"Once there is no hierarchy, the medium is the institution," said Stoll. "Discrediting the medium equals discrediting the creed."