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978-0-521-09086-5 - The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity

Manuel A. Vasquez

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## *Introduction*

Evangelical Protestantism has almost certainly replaced Roman Catholicism as Brazil's most widely practiced faith. The significance of this goes beyond theology: the old Brazilian order, based upon a rigid hierarchy and social immobility, has broken down. A new social atmosphere, one more flexible and compatible with capitalism and democracy, is emerging . . .

A good case can be made that the local Catholic Church's espousal of so-called liberation theology, with its Marxist, class-struggle overtones, has weakened, not strengthened, the Catholic Church among the poor. There is now a widespread recognition that liberation theology overlooked the emotional, personal message most people seek from religion.<sup>1</sup>

### SETTING UP THE PROJECT

In recent years, religion has been a major force in social change, from the Middle East to Eastern Europe, from Latin America to the US. One of the most dramatic cases of the powerful influence of religion on political processes has been the Latin American "popular church" (in Portuguese, *igreja popular*), a set of reformist institutional and pastoral initiatives, among which liberation theology and base ecclesial communities (CEBs) are key components.

The Latin American popular church arose out of the Second Vatican Council's call for the Catholic church to enter into dialogue with the secular world. In this dialogue, "this-worldly" Catholic doctrines such as the efficacy of works came to resonate

<sup>1</sup> J. Marcom Jr., "The Fire Down South," *Forbes* (October 15, 1990), 56 and 66.

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with notions of intra-historical transcendence (the capacity to act effectively in history), self-realization, and social emancipation embodied in modernist ideologies such as humanistic Marxism and existentialism. The popular church became a prime example of the synthesis of secular and religious utopias, where divine history does not cancel human progress but rather represents its fulfillment.

During the repressive 1970s in Latin America, the popular church's modernist reading of the millenarian message of Christianity provided, in liberation theology, a mobilizing ideology to challenge social injustice and, in the CEBs, a model of a new, more egalitarian society. Indeed, CEBs – small, neighborhood-based groups in which poor people, inspired by their interpretations of biblical images of justice, solidarity, and liberation, seek to transform the world as both a precondition and a sign of the coming reign of God – represented to many Latin American Catholic intellectuals a unique mechanism for internal and external reform. Within the church, they increased the laity's participation and power; outside the church, they strengthened a beleaguered civil society.

Nowhere did CEBs attain greater prominence than in Brazil, where, with support from the bishops and an active core of liberation theologians, they became not only a source of church renewal but a major democratizing force as the country emerged from military dictatorship during the late 1970s. By the mid-1980s, however, CEB growth in Brazil had slowed down considerably while competing religions, especially Pentecostalism, continued to expand rapidly.

These two factors have triggered a sense of crisis among popular church activists, leading them to question the viability of pastoral strategies such as CEBs in reaching and serving the poor. Why are the poor apparently betraying their own emancipatory interests, refusing to participate in a church that is actively working to transform unjust social conditions? Why are many poor people instead joining Pentecostal groups which seem to advocate a conservative or at best quietist stance *vis-à-vis* the status quo? Is it a case of alienation and false consciousness, or is it that the popular church's pastoral methods do not respond to the felt needs of the poor?

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This study explores the crisis of the popular church's religio-political utopian project. More specifically, it reconstructs the economic, socio-political, cultural, and religious conditions that have hindered the production and reception of the popular church's message of intra-historical transcendence. These conditions have also created a favorable climate for the acceptance of alternative readings of the Christian soteriological message such as those advocated by certain brands of Pentecostalism.

As I will argue throughout the book, the crisis of the popular church's project and the ascendance of Pentecostalism in Latin America point toward a deeper crisis: that of modernist conceptions of human action, history, resistance, and utopia. Thus, understanding the crisis of the popular church, particularly in one of its most mature embodiments in Brazil, might shed light on modernity's plight.

I contend that the roots of the problems facing the *igreja popular* lie in a widening gap between the goals, demands, and internal logic of its pastoral-pedagogical method and worldview, on the one hand, and, on the other, the emergence of a social configuration that blends elements of a transnational capitalism with local patterns of economic and political activity more typical of pre-modern, patrimonial societies. This hybridization results from the uneven penetration of capitalism in Brazil.

Brazilians have experienced radical changes in their life conditions, especially during the late 1980s when the country's economy underwent a period of crisis and restructuring to reposition itself more competitively in the world market. For the vast majority of the population, and particularly for the poorest sectors, these changes have meant a drastic deterioration of their material conditions of existence. The pressures and needs generated by this deterioration have in turn forced poor people to react defensively, resorting to the pragmatic use of short-term, individualistic, and patrimonial survival strategies drawn from the national political culture.

Poverty is not new to Brazil. In fact, during the 1960s and '70s the struggle to eliminate poverty was one of the key motivating forces behind the popular church's politico-religious activism. In the 1980s, however, the narrow margin of stability that allowed poor people to dream of improvement and to engage in transform-

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ative social action was dramatically reduced. The worsening socio-economic situation has redrawn the limits of the possible for poor Brazilians, redefining notions of agency, history, and social change. Faced with a continuous decline in life conditions, with an unresponsive, impotent, and corrupt political system, and with an increasingly unpredictable and baffling economic world-system, many poor Brazilians are experiencing a severe crisis of belief. In the face of this chaotic situation, it has become less and less plausible to claim, as do liberation theology and the popular church, that Brazilians can become the “artisans of their own destiny,” that they can, by their own efforts, make their society more rational, just, and egalitarian.

The popular church’s eschatological reading of the modernist project of self-consciousness, self-determination, and self-realization, and its pastoral-pedagogical methods to advance this project stand in stark contradiction to the loss of plausibility of the notion of intra-historical transcendence brought on by the economic and socio-political crisis of Brazilian society. More concretely, the *igreja popular*’s reading of social change conflicts with most poor people’s pragmatic reliance on short-term, individualistic, and patrimonial survival strategies. The popular church’s emphasis on long-term, structural transformation undertaken by collective emancipatory agents acting from below has become increasingly difficult to carry out, given the constraints facing people, particularly the poor, and given the increasing fragmentation of everyday life. This fragmentation has disqualified appeals to and reliance upon a unified, collective emancipatory subject such as “the poor.”

The contradiction between the popular church’s *Weltanschauung* and praxis and evolving life conditions on the ground may explain not only the loss of appeal of the liberationist message but also the expansion of alternative religious traditions which offer more flexible strategies to negotiate the demands of the economic and political crisis. I hypothesize that the growth of Pentecostalism coincides with the emergence of new conceptions of utopia and transcendence at the grassroots, some of which pose serious challenges to the process of democratization, while others have the potential for strengthening it.

To ground my argument empirically, I focus on a particular

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case study: a base ecclesial community on the periphery of the diocese of Nova Iguaçu, a working-class city at the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. The diocese is known for its vigorous implementation of post-Medellín pastoral and ecclesiological reforms.<sup>2</sup> Drawing from fieldwork in the diocese between November 1990 and June 1991, I trace the evolution of the community from its inception to its present state of decline, showing how changes in the international, national, and local economies interact with pastoral and ecclesial variables to condition this decline. I reconstruct the base community's trajectory through informal conversations, focus groups and in-depth interviews with members located at various levels in the organization, community documents (such as the logbooks of the base community, the neighborhood association, and of the local chapter of Catholic Action), and my own observations of social, religious and political events.

I first map out at the micro- (community) level the obstacles and contradictions that have hindered the pastoral-pedagogical activists of progressive Catholics in the evolving (macro) economic context. Then I turn to the ways in which the case study may help us understand the overall crisis of the popular church in Brazil, of progressive Catholicism, and of modernity's emancipatory project.

## SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As characterized above, this study seeks to link macro- and micro-levels of social analysis.<sup>3</sup> I believe that only by elucidating the relations of reciprocal determination between local and global processes can one apprehend the complexity of social phenomena.

Recent readings of the crisis of the *igreja popular* range from detailed ethnographic studies of particular religious communities,

<sup>2</sup> On the popular church in Nova Iguaçu, see S. Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil: 1916–1985* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986). Mainwaring stops at the mid-80s, a time when the full effects and complex dynamics of the crisis were not completely apparent.

<sup>3</sup> Micro-dynamics and macro-processes are linked by interconnected, intermediate levels of social activity. An example of these “meso-levels” in my study is the diocese of Nova Iguaçu, which connects global institutional forces (i.e., the Vatican conservative offensive) and local practices and organizations (Pedra Bonita's CEB).

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that neglect larger social and cultural dynamics,<sup>4</sup> to institutional approaches which, concentrating on intra-ecclesial politics at the elite level, do not consider the impact of the crisis at the grass-roots.<sup>5</sup> This study seeks to avoid the shortcomings of these partial readings. On the one hand, I examine how the crisis affects the life and work of grassroots Catholic activists and pastoral agents. I am interested especially in capturing the local actors' interpretations of the crisis and of their pastoral strategies to negotiate it. On the other hand, I place these interpretations and strategies in the context of power dynamics that take place at the institutional (church), national, and international levels.

My interest on the local actors' perceptions and reactions arises, first, from the need to ground empirically my speculations about the fate of progressive Catholicism in Brazil and other modernist emancipatory grassroots projects in Latin America as capitalism enters a new phase of globalization and deepening, as it penetrates into regions and spheres of life hitherto unexploited. This phase is characterized by "flexible forms of accumulation" that permit capital to flow across existing geographical and temporal boundaries, not only transforming the configuration of the working-class worldwide but also generating new challenges for local communities. According to David Harvey, flexible accumulation has "allowed capital to shed its social responsibilities not only in the workplace . . . but also toward the communities in which it operates."<sup>6</sup> He elaborates his argument: "Multinational corporations [have] ransacked the globe for new profit opportunities and [have been] prepared to abandon their home bases to take advantage of them, taking capital and employment to wherever they judged conditions to be most advantageous." This approach has had "radical implications for the functioning of labor markets, for work

<sup>4</sup> See for example J. Burdick, *Looking for God in Brazil: The Progressive Catholic Church in Urban Brazil's Religious Arena* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> See for example R. Della Cava, "The 'People's Church,' the Vatican and the Abertura," in *Democratizing Brazil*, ed. A. Stepan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), and "Vatican Policy, 1978–1990: An Updated Overview," *Social Research* 59, no. 1 (1992), 171–199; J. Daudelin and W. E. Hewitt, "Latin American Politics: Exit the Catholic Church?" Paper delivered at the conference on "Church, State, and Society in Latin America: Sociopolitical and Economic Restructuring Since 1960," Villanova University, Villanova, PA, March 18–19, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> D. Harvey, "Flexibility: Threat or Opportunity?" *Socialist Review* 21, no. 1 (1991), 72.

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styles and labor skills, for the quality of life, and for patterns of consumption.”<sup>7</sup>

The second reason for the focus on local perspectives is that, since the popular church’s stated goal is to serve the (poor) people, it is necessary to identify the specific ways in which it is fulfilling and/or failing to fulfill the concrete expectations and needs of the people. Only then can we evaluate its success in implementing its emancipatory project. Such an evaluation may help sociologists of religion and those interested in the interaction between economic and cultural change to construct comparative studies of the differential appeal various religious traditions have on the ground in the emerging socio-economic context.

Finally, and most importantly, since it is the local actors who experience the effects of global and structural economic changes, it is crucial to gather their perceptions and reactions in order to understand the specific transformations of the everyday world upon which and within which they act.

Although local actors bear the brunt of macro-structural changes in their daily struggle for survival, they do not always perceive the multiplicity of determining factors that accompany these transformations. Even when they can name the needs and constraints they face, local actors are often not able to trace the historical roots of these needs and constraints, or the links the latter have with systemic processes. This is because the actors are immersed in these processes in ways which demand immediate attention to often life-threatening effects and which limit access to socio-analytical tools.

Intellectuals, on the other hand, possess, as Bourdieu notes, a relative “distance from necessity,” that is, a capacity awarded by their privileged position to “neutralize ordinary urgencies and bracket practical ends.”<sup>8</sup> Taking advantage of this capacity, I introduce my own interpretation of the crisis of the popular church in Brazil. This interpretation historicizes and contextualizes the crisis, elucidating its local, national, and global components. The theoretical framework that informs this interpretation is the world-

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>8</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 54.

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systems paradigm, which in my view provides the most synthetic and coherent critical approach to global economic transformations to date.<sup>9</sup>

There have been already some attempts to apply the world-systems perspective to the study of religious phenomena.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, these efforts have tended to remain at the abstract and macro-level, focusing on general notions such as the “new world order” and “globalization” and failing to indicate how analyses of the transformation in the capitalist system may help us understand the nature of religious choices, beliefs, and practices in particular historical settings. Sociology of religion’s persistent concern with developing grand models of secularization together with the emergence of overly mechanical game-theoretical approaches to religious behavior has exacerbated this ahistoricism further. Moreover, analyses informed by the world-system paradigm have tended to ignore cultural and ideological elements or to present them as mere reflections of material processes. My study of the obstacles faced at the local level by the popular church’s utopian ideology and emancipatory pastoral practices in the context of contemporary capitalism and changes in world Catholicism seeks to address these weaknesses.

The tension between the macro and the micro and between local and outside knowledge is not new to sociology. Ever since Weber proposed a methodological individualism to counter-balance Marxist holism, sociological theory and research has been disabled by what George Ritzer calls a “micro-macro extremism.”<sup>11</sup> The first extreme includes scholars who count as social facts only the observable behavior of individuals and small groups. For these micro-sociological empiricists, including approaches such as exchange theory, symbolic interactionist, and ethno-

<sup>9</sup> See I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, vols. 1–3 (New York: Academic Books, 1974–1989); and J. Smith, I. Wallerstein, et al., *Creating and Transforming Households: The Constraints of the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> See among others W. C. Roof, ed., *World Order and Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991); and R. Robertson, “The Globalization Paradigm: Thinking Globally,” in *Religion and the Social Order: New Developments in Theory and Research*, ed. D. Bromley (Greenwich, CT: Jai Press Inc., 1991).

<sup>11</sup> G. Ritzer, “Micro-Macro Linkage in Sociological Theory: Applying a Metatheoretical Tool,” in *Frontiers of Social Theory: New Syntheses*, ed. G. Ritzer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).



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methodology, larger collective mechanisms do not exist. The social space is constituted by the aggregation of individual behavior across time and in different micro-situations. “Structures” are, at best, heuristic devices which the researcher introduces to order the world. At worst, they are unfounded abstractions that divert attention from real social facts, leading to erroneous analyses of social reality.

For the other sociological camp, which includes structuralism, structural functionalism, systems theory approaches, conflict theory, and certain forms of Marxism, the behavior of particular individuals, though appearing spontaneous and erratic, results from underlying symbolic and material arrangements which transcend the will of any given individual. It is in this sense that, as Durkheim argued, these arrangements are “collective social facts.”<sup>12</sup> Macro-theorists believe that institutional, structural and/or systemic arrangements determine individual behavior, compelling the actor to behave in specific ways given her/his position in those arrangements.

Often the dispute between micro and macro approaches is accompanied by other disabling dichotomies such as those between subjectivism and objectivism, agency and structure, and the mental and the material. In this book I have sought to avoid getting caught in these unproductive dichotomies, attempting to bring into play macro and micro levels of analysis, as well as subjective and objective visions and cultural and economic realms of activity. However, I have not merely juxtaposed the various terms. Rather, I have tried throughout the essay to establish relations of mutual determination between micro and macro levels of analysis, moments of interpretation, and fields of praxis. Like Giddens and Bourdieu, I believe that social facts are best characterized not in terms of dichotomies (which one must then somehow bridge inductively or deductively), but in dialectical terms.<sup>13</sup> A social fact has both micro and macro-referents, it is at the same

<sup>12</sup> E. Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1938).

<sup>13</sup> On the epistemological basis of a dialectical approach to social practice see A. Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

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time structuring and structured, it both produces and reproduces micro–macro social reality, and it contains “mental” as well as material elements.

In unraveling the crisis of Brazilian popular church’s utopian project, I explore the ways in which larger structural processes express themselves at the local, everyday level, shaping, constraining, and enabling the interactions, perceptions, and strategies, particularly religious ones, of situated social actors. I examine the ways in which systemic processes that transcend local dynamics and knowledge generate material and cultural pressures and needs for historically located, embodied individuals. As Giddens correctly notes, “All social systems, no matter how grand or far-flung, both express and are expressed in the routines of daily social life, mediating the physical and sensory properties of the human body.”<sup>14</sup>

Needs, interpretations, resources, and practices at the personal, household, and community levels that are conditioned by systemic processes, in turn, set the limits of intra-historical transcendence, that is, of the extent to which actors may engage in practices that challenge the effects and causes of larger structural processes. In other words, micro-environments provide the horizons within which social actors construct, maintain, and transform the social order. Micro and macro dynamics are, thus, constitutive of each other. In Giddens’s words, “the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize.”<sup>15</sup>

On the question of structure versus agency, I steer a middle course between those who see social action as generated from disembodied structures and those who picture it as issuing from the individual conceived abstractly, either as a totally sovereign subjectivity or as a purely rational consciousness always guided by a means–ends, calculative rationality. I focus on the actions of situated individuals who must work strategically with the resources at hand, which often include a limited knowledge and control of all the factors involved, in order to construct viable micro-environments of existence within the constraints of macro-social processes.

This view corresponds with sociologist Ann Swidler’s concep-

<sup>14</sup> Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, 36.      <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.