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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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In this book, Manuel Vásquez shows how the contemporary interplay of religion and politics initially fostered a progressive Catholic theology in Brazil, and later, became an obstacle to its further development. In the 1970s, a dedicated core of bishops and pastoral agents drew from Catholic social thought, humanistic Marxism, and existentialism to forge a utopian vision of social emancipation. The “popular” church they constructed inspired a religious renewal and provided the moral and ideological impetus for the emerging democratization movement. By the mid-1980s, the advances made by progressive Catholicism were increasingly threatened by a host of economic, political, and ecclesial changes that reconfigured the role of the church in civil society. In this incisive study of a Catholic community near Rio de Janeiro, Vásquez argues that the plight of progressive Catholicism forms part of a more profound crisis of modernity and humanistic discourses in Brazil.

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Religion increasingly is seen as a renewed force, and is recognized as an important factor in the modern world in all aspects of life – cultural, economic, and political. It is no longer a matter of surprise to find religious factors at work in areas and situations of political tension. However, our information about these situations has tended to come from two main sources. The news-gathering agencies are well placed to convey information, but are hampered by the fact that their representatives are not equipped to provide analysis of the religious forces involved. Alternatively, the movements generate their own accounts, which understandably seem less than objective to outside observers. There is no lack of information or factual material, but a real need for sound academic analysis. Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion meets this need. It attempts to give an objective, balanced, and programmatic coverage to issues which – while of wide potential interest – have been largely neglected by analytical investigation, apart from the appearance of sporadic individual studies. Intended to enable debate to proceed at a higher level, the series should lead to a new phase in our understanding of the relationship between ideology and religion.

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Only twenty years ago it was widely assumed that religion had lost its previous place in Western culture and that this pattern would spread throughout the world. Since then religion has become a renewed force, recognized as an important factor in the modern world in all aspects of life, cultural, economic and political. This is true not only of the Third World, but in Europe and North America. At this moment surprisingly and unpredictably it is the case in the UK. It is no longer unusual to find a religious dimension present in areas of political tension.

Religion and ideology form a mixture which can be of interest to the observer, but which is in practice dangerous and explosive. Our information about such matters comes for the most part from three types of sources. The first is the media which understandably tend to concentrate on newsworthy events, without taking the time to deal with the underlying issues of which they are but symptoms. The second source comprises studies by social scientists who often adopt a functionalist and reductionalist view of the faith and beliefs which motivate those directly involved in such situations. Finally, there are the statements and writings of those committed to the religious or ideological movements themselves. We seldom lack information but there is a need – often an urgent need – for sound objective analysis which can make use of the best contemporary approaches to both politics and religion. Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion is designed to meet this need.

The subject matter is global and this is reflected in the choice of both topics and authors. The initial volumes have been concerned primarily with movements involving the Christian religion, but it is intended that movements involving other world religions will be

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subjected to the same objective critical analysis. In all cases it is our intention that an accurate and sensitive account of religion should be informed by an objective and sophisticated application of perspectives from the social sciences.

Base communities are constantly referred to in any study of the popular church or liberation theology in Latin America, but it is notoriously difficult to get reliable information about the movement. Supporters tend to exaggerate the numbers involved and present it in idealized terms. Detractors feel free to misrepresent behaviour, beliefs and objectives. Statistical surveys ignore its spiritual life. One of the aims of this series is to publish studies which arise from careful, local empirical research but which are sensitive to the religious life of communities. The present volume is an admirable example of just this balance. Manuel Vásquez had experience of base communities while a student in El Salvador in the 1970s. To investigate the crisis in the popular church he has recently spent time with base communities in Brazil. His findings undermine many current stereotypes. Liberation theology has failed to respond to the new reality in Latin America, preserving many utopian themes which now lack credibility. Its lay leaders are often isolated from the communities it intended to serve. The new reality is neo-liberalism in its ideological and economic forms. The rapid spread of Pentecostal churches may have been originally to compensate for a lack of attention in liberation theology to the emotional needs of the people, but now Pentecostals are better prepared to live and work within the new situation. This study is a valuable analysis of the actual situation of the popular church. Its findings may give food for thought to leaders of the traditional churches and of course the Catholic Church in particular.

DUNCAN FORRESTER AND ALISTAIR KEE

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My first contact with progressive Catholicism came in El Salvador in 1974. Having just finished parochial school, I decided to enroll in the Externado de San José, a Jesuit-run high school in San Salvador. Just a year before, the Externado had been at the center of a firestorm. There were shrill accusations in the national media that Jesuits were indoctrinating students with atheist propaganda that incited social divisiveness and violence. Many wealthy parents reacted angrily, taking their children out of the Externado. They felt a deep sense of betrayal: a high school which they had built through their generous contributions and which had consistently provided an elite education to their children was implementing a curriculum that emphasized justice and equality and accepting working-class and lower-middle-class students.

The controversy over the Externado was one of the first skirmishes in a long, fierce battle to determine the proper role of the Catholic Church in Salvadoran politics during the 1970s, a period of growing popular mobilization and intensifying government repression. The Jesuits were at the forefront of pastoral innovation in the country, seeking to implement the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and the Second Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Colombia (1968). In addition to changing the academic curriculum at their high school and university to incorporate Catholic social teaching and socio-historical analyses of the Salvadoran reality, the Jesuits had, since the early 1970s, helped create small Christian communities in Aguilares, north of San Salvador. These communities, which came to be known as base ecclesial communities (*comunidades eclesiales de base* or CEBs), were a key pastoral initiative used by progressive Catholics

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in El Salvador and elsewhere in Latin America to build a “popular church” – a church that would at once serve and be “the people of God,” focusing on the poorest sectors of the population.

In Aguilares and nearby villages, the Jesuits brought together impoverished peasants in CEBs where they read the Bible and reflected on the struggles of everyday life. Armed with a greater consciousness of their plight and of the possibilities of transforming it, the peasants formed a union. This increasing militancy alarmed local landowners, who reacted with an escalating campaign of intimidation and repression that led eventually to the assassination of Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande in 1977. Numerous attacks on progressive Catholics followed Grande’s murder, claiming the lives of priests, nuns, pastoral agents, lay activists, and even an archbishop.

So it was in the polarized climate of the mid-1970s that I decided to attend the Externado. In retrospect, my years there represent without a doubt the single most important period in my intellectual formation. This is not all that surprising: to be confronted with the works of Adorno, Fromm, Frank, Cardoso, and others can be a turning point, especially at an age in which you are groping for answers to the question of who you are and at a time when the world around you is spiralling into violence.

But it was not so much the content of the curriculum as the underlying method and impetus that left an enduring mark on me. At the Externado, we drank from the tradition that Paul Ricoeur has characterized as “the hermeneutics of suspicion.”¹ We developed an abiding passion for truth. We acquired an overwhelming drive to ask questions, to get behind the surface of things, to historicize and contextualize events, to demystify reality, uncovering the clever and the not so subtle deceptions that economic elites and the military government had fabricated to hide the many forms of oppression in Salvadoran society. We learned that the social order was neither a given nor a natural product. Rather, it was contingent, the result of an on-going history of domination and exclusion. This critical realization and the brutality of the

¹ P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 148.

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situation compelled us to unmask the various forms in which power was being applied around us.

The concern for robust critical thinking continues to lie at the heart of my intellectual endeavors, even as I have distanced myself considerably from the religious roots of that “emancipatory interest,” in Habermas’s words.² Critical thinking need not be wedded to a particular institution or corpus of knowledge. It is grounded on and propelled by the human need and capacity to transcend, by what Foucault calls “our impatience for liberty,” the principle of “permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy . . . a principle that is at the heart of the historical consciousness that the Enlightenment has of itself.”³ Critical thinking is the cognitive expression of a larger, still “unfulfilled project,” which found one of its most influential articulations in the Enlightenment, to recover, reflect on and advance humanity’s “self-consciousness, self-determination and self-realization.”⁴ Progressive Catholicism, out of which my historico-critical attitude had emerged, represents but one specific deployment of that larger project.

In the late 1980s, as I embarked on graduate studies in religion, exaggerated reports in the media started to surface that liberation theology was dead and that Latin America was being overtaken by an unstoppable wave of politically conservative, pro-capitalist Pentecostalism. With the Reagan administration in power, it seemed in those years that liberal capitalism, in its supply-side version, was on the verge of conquering the world, even if it had to resort to violent, illegal means, as in the case of US policy toward Central America. That perception deepened as the Berlin Wall collapsed and the Soviet Union disintegrated. Those years also marked the height of the postmodernist controversy, when it became fashionable in US academia to proclaim the demise of modernity’s emancipatory project.

In an attempt to go beyond facile readings of the apparent crisis of Latin American progressive Catholicism, I decided to examine

² J. Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 308.

³ M. Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 44.

⁴ J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 338.

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more closely the fate of liberation theology and the popular Catholic Church in Latin America as embodiments of modernity's emancipatory project. This decision was based on my own intellectual trajectory: I had witnessed too many progressive Catholics – including some of my classmates and teachers at the Externado – give up their lives in defense of the principles of human autonomy and truth to take the demise of modern utopias lightly and abandon myself to self-indulgent deconstructive games.

The decision to study progressive Catholicism in Latin America did not mean that I would take an apologetic, partisan approach. It meant, rather, that I would engage in an exercise in self-reflection, as it were, turning my critical lenses on the tradition that had first given them to me. Through this self-reflective distancing, I wanted to explore the possibility that the crisis of progressive Catholicism signaled the exhaustion of the underlying emancipatory impetus that inspires my critical thinking.

Therefore, my first acknowledgment must go to my peers and teachers at the Externado, for they are the ones who provided the intellectual inspiration for this project. Critical thinking by itself, however, can become impotent, prisoner to an endless exercise of theoretical “navel-gazing.” To bear fruit, critical thinking must confront reality, as the people at the Externado well know. Thus, this study would not have been possible without the people of the Pedra Bonita base community in Brazil, whose experiences I was fortunate to share, however briefly. More than anything, it was their thirst for change and their perseverance in the face of contradictions and failures that inspired me to focus on the obstacles to transformative practices at the local level. Pedra Bonita's long, often inconclusive, everyday struggles to fashion a more democratic and just Brazil made concrete for me the implications of the crisis of modernity for men and women in Latin America.

Access to the places and people a researcher wants to study is not always easy. In my case, Marcello Azevedo and Francisco Ivern, both of the Instituto Brasileiro de Desenvolvimento (IB-RADES), facilitated the process greatly, providing helpful connections with pastoral agents on the ground. Among these pastoral agents, I am most grateful to Janice Da Cunha, José Gatellier, Ivo Plunian, Mário Prigal and Lourdinha Dos Santos, for sharing with

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me their insights about the nature, potential, and limitations of the popular church in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. They also introduced me to many of the lay grassroots activists in the base communities, biblical circles, and the Ação Católica Operária (ACO), whose lives I have tried to document in this study.

In Brazil, I also received a great deal of assistance from the library staffs at Instituto Superior de Estudos da Religião (ISER) and the Centro Ecumênico de Documentação e Informação (CEDI), particularly from Christian Moraes and José Atilio Silva Iulianelli. They were extremely helpful as I sorted through the vast bibliographical material that has been produced locally about the popular church.

In the US, I am indebted to my colleagues and friends at Temple University and the University of Florida. Kyriakos Kontopolous, Susan Lewis, Joseph Margolis, Azim Nanji, John Raines, Richard Schaul, Ofelia Schutte, Hal Stahmer, David Watt, Philip Williams, Howard Winant and Gibson Winter offered valuable observations and critiques that greatly enhanced the final product. I would also like to thank Ruth Parr of Cambridge University Press and the two anonymous readers for the Press.

I am especially indebted to my wife and colleague Anna Peterson for her patient and mindful readings of the manuscript and her incisive theoretical and methodological insights. More than anyone else, she has contributed to sharpening the arguments I advance in this study.

Finally, I want to thank my family: my parents, Manuel and Rosa Consuelo, and my sisters, María Evangelina and Carmen, for their abiding understanding and love. Together with my teachers and peers at the Externado de San José, they have shaped the emancipatory interest that informs my work. It is to them that I dedicate this study.