

American Views of the Progressive Catholic Church in Brazil, 1964-1972: From Suspicion to Collaboration*

DOI: 10.15446/achsc.v44n2.64025

Visiones norteamericanas de la Iglesia
Católica progresista en Brasil, 1964-1972:
de la sospecha a la colaboración

*Visões norte-americanas da Igreja católica progressista
no Brasil, 1964-1972: da suspeita à colaboração*

SIGIFREDO ROMERO**

Instituto de Estudios Socio-Históricos Fray Alonso de Zamora

Universidad Santo Tomás

Bogotá, Colombia

* The author thanks Professor Ana Maria Bidegain for her longstanding support and the extraordinary direction of the thesis, which this article is based on. The thesis, presented as a requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in Religious Studies by Florida International University, is listed in Works Cited.

** sromerot@unal.edu.co

Artículo de investigación

Recepción: 4 de abril del 2016. Aprobación: 23 de agosto del 2016.

Cómo citar este artículo

Sigifredo Romero, "American Views of the Progressive Catholic Church in Brazil, 1964-1972: From Suspicion to Collaboration", *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura* 44.2 (2017): 333-355.

[334]

ABSTRACT

Both the United States and the Brazilian Catholic Church played decisive roles during the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil between 1964 and 1985. Therefore, an understanding of the relationship between these influential political actors is imperative. This article explores American views of and interests in the Brazilian Catholic Church through a critical examination, categorization, discourse analysis and periodization of cables produced by the U.S. diplomatic mission in Brazil from 1964 to 1972. It maintains that, in the ideological context of National Security doctrine, the U.S. regarded the progressive Catholic movement, and at some level the Church as a whole, as a threat. Nonetheless, starting in 1969, after an intensification of political repression and the growing institutional commitment of the Church to human rights defense, the American approach changed from suspicion to collaboration for development. This article sheds light on the changing political context during the Brazilian military regime.

Keywords: (Author) American diplomatic service, Brazilian Catholic Church; (Thesaurus) Church, dictatorship, diplomatic archives, State.

RESUMEN

Tanto los Estados Unidos como la Iglesia católica brasileña fueron agentes decisivos durante la dictadura militar que gobernó a Brasil entre 1964 y 1985. Por tanto, una comprensión de la relación entre estos dos influyentes actores políticos parece imperativa. Este artículo explora las visiones estadounidenses de la Iglesia católica brasileña, así como sus intereses en ella, mediante el análisis crítico, la tematización, el análisis del discurso y la periodización de los telegramas de la misión diplomática norteamericana en Brasil entre 1964 y 1972. Se sostiene que, en el contexto ideológico de la doctrina de Seguridad Nacional, los Estados Unidos consideraban al movimiento progresista católico y, en cierta medida, a la Iglesia en su conjunto como una amenaza. Sin embargo, a partir de 1969, después del endurecimiento de la represión política y del creciente compromiso institucional de la Iglesia con la defensa de los derechos humanos, el enfoque estadounidense pasó de la sospecha a la colaboración desarrollista. Este artículo arroja luz sobre el cambiante escenario político durante el régimen militar brasileño.

[335]

Palabras clave: (Autor) Iglesia católica brasileña, servicio diplomático estadounidense; (Thesaurus) archivos diplomáticos, dictadura, Estado, Iglesia.

RESUMO

Tanto os Estados Unidos quanto a Igreja católica brasileira foram agentes decisivos durante a ditadura militar que governou o Brasil entre 1964 e 1985. Portanto, uma compreensão da relação entre esses dois influentes atores políticos parece imperativa. Este artigo explora as visões e os interesses norte-americanos sobre a Igreja católica brasileira por meio da análise crítica, da tematização, da análise do discurso e da periodização dos telegramas da missão diplomática norte-americana no Brasil entre 1964 e 1972. Sustenta-se que, no contexto ideológico da doutrina de Segurança Nacional, os Estados Unidos consideravam o movimento progressista católico e, em algum nível, a Igreja em seu conjunto como uma ameaça. Contudo, em 1969, depois do endurecimento da repressão política e do crescente compromisso institucional da Igreja com a defesa dos direitos humanos, a abordagem norte-americana passou da suspeita à colaboração desenvolvimentista. Este artigo esclarece o cenário político em transformação durante o regime militar brasileiro.

Palavras-chave: (Autor) Igreja católica brasileira, Serviço diplomático americano; (Thesaurus) arquivos diplomáticos, ditadura, Estado, Igreja.

Introduction

[336]

This article explores U.S. views of and interests in the progressive wing of the Brazilian Catholic Church during the first and definitive 9 years of the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil between 1964 and 1985.¹ By then, Brazil was the epicenter of an emerging progressive movement in Latin America defined by Michael Löwy as Liberationist Christianity.² Liberationists stressed historical realities, such as capitalism, as causes of suffering and injustice. The movement was encouraged by the Second Vatican Council and reached its height during the Assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Conference held in Medellín, Colombia in 1968. The most progressive segments of the Brazilian Church were Catholic Action groups (*Ação Católica* —AC—), regular clergy, foreign priests and churchmen of Brazil's northeast region.³ At the same time, the United States was a benefactor of the military regime during those years marked by the ideology of National Security.⁴ In this context, the U.S.A. considered progressive Catholics to be a threat to its interests.

A central policy of the dictatorship was the repression of the most progressive sectors of society, among them, the liberationists. Eventually the regime targeted the entire institution, and a bitter Church-State confrontation marked Brazilian political life in those years. Repression against the Church took the form of public accusations of communism, raids, expulsion of foreign priests, detentions, torture, and murder. The Church's reaction included linguistic performances such as speeches and public letters. After a hardening of repression in 1968, the Church developed an institutional

-
1. For a historical account of the dictatorship, see: Thomas Skidmore, *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964-85* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
 2. Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1996) 32-33. For a view on the encounter between religion and politics, see: Daniel Levine, "Religion and Politics, Politics and Religion: An Introduction", *Churches and Politics in Latin America*, ed. Daniel Levine (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979) 16-40.
 3. For an institutional approach to the Brazilian Church, see Thomas Bruneau, *The Church in Brazil: The Politics of Religion* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).
 4. See Carlos Fico, *O grande irmão: da operação Brother Sam aos anos de chumbo. O governo dos Estados Unidos e a ditadura militar brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2008).

stance on the defense of human rights and became the primary antagonist to the regime in the 1970s.⁵

Although the Johnson and Nixon governments actively supported the dictatorship, international activist networks and the growing interest of the press starting in 1969 made it difficult for the U.S.A. to hold this position. This led to more nuanced and complex relations between the two countries. The central thesis of this article is that due to transformations within the Church, its relation to the regime, and U.S.A.-Brazil relations, there was a shift in the American approach to the Church as of 1969, when the Church ceased to be considered a threat and was instead perceived as a desirable partner and a defender of human rights.

[337]

Literature Review

Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, studies on the political performance of the Church and its relation to the state have included the period of the dictatorship. Such are the cases of Márcio Moreira Alves' *A Igreja e a política no Brasil*⁶ and Mainwaring's *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil 1916-1985*.⁷ At the same time, the specific interest in the relationship between Church and the military regime arose. An early and very detailed account of the first five years of this relationship can be found in Antoine's *Church and Power in Brazil*.⁸ Lernoux's *Cry of the People* is a classic in terms of the connection between Church, Latin American governments and the U.S.A. Lernoux deals with topics such as the espionage of the Church and the use of religious subjects by U.S. agencies as informers.⁹

In recent years, disclosure of sources has led to new perspectives on both Church-Regime and U.S.A.-Brazil relations. A pioneer of the former is Kenneth Serbin's *Secret Dialogues*, in which the author draws on sources

-
5. Skidmore 137; Kenneth Serbin, *Secret Dialogues: Church-State Relations, Torture, and Social Justice in Authoritarian Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000) 74.
 6. Márcio Moreira Alves, *A Igreja e a política no Brasil* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1979).
 7. Scott Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil, 1916-1985* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).
 8. Charles Antoine, *Church and Power in Brazil*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973).
 9. Penny Lernoux, *Cry of the People: United States Involvement in the Rise of Fascism, Torture, and Murder and the Persecution of the Catholic Church in Latin America* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1980) 283.

[338]

available since the mid-1990s including documents from the Department of Political and Social Order (*Departamento de Ordem Política e Social* — DOPS—), the main agency of repression during the regime. With his findings on the Bipartite Commission, a space for a high-level negotiation between the Brazilian bishops and the military from 1970 to 1974, Serbin shows previously unknown aspects of the relationship between these institutions. More recently, in a detailed study, Mendes de Souza examines the documentation about the Church in the DOPS of São Paulo in the 1964-1976 period.¹⁰

The current effort to understand the dictatorship, to which I would like to contribute with this paper, is led by Serbin, Carlos Fico and James Green. In *O grande irmão*, Fico discusses U.S.-Brazil relations and their shifts during the first 10 years of the military regime, exposing a complex panorama with setbacks and changing positions since as early as 1965.¹¹

In turn, in *We Cannot Remain Silent*, Green focuses on the social movement that emerged in the U.S. against the Brazilian dictatorship.¹² It also sheds light on how the attitudes of the U.S. government, but particularly American journalistic coverage of the Brazilian human rights situation, were of great concern for the regime. On this topic, it is worth noting the work of Itagyba, who in “O Brasil ditatorial nas páginas do *New York Times*” closely approaches our purposes with her contribution to the understanding of American views of the Brazilian dictatorship in the media.¹³

These new approaches overcome an old, tacit dichotomy between right and left and draw on hitherto inaccessible data. Considering the works already published and the development of the debate, my thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of the international relevance of the Catholic Church, its conflict with the Brazilian military regime, and the changing position of the United States towards the Brazilian political scene. In a broader sense, it will help to more clearly envision religious institutions as international political actors with transformative potentials.

10. Admar Mendes de Souza, “Estado e Igreja católica. O movimento social do cristianismo de libertação sob vigilância do DOPS/SP (1954-1974)”, doctoral dissertation in Social History (São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 2009) 179-355

11. Fico 162-165.

12. James Green, *We Cannot Remain Silent: Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

13. Renata Itagyba, “O Brasil ditatorial nas páginas do *New York Times* (1964-1985)”, masters dissertation in Communication (São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 2013).

Sources and Methodology

This article is based on all the records of the American Foreign Service in Brazil concerning the Brazilian Catholic Church during the 1964-1972 period.¹⁴ Given that my sources are kept in an official archive of the United States, authenticity is not a relevant problem. Nevertheless, veracity could still be called into question. In my thesis, the information is interpreted, taking advantage of the historical distance, bearing in mind the context of the document, and confronting the data with other primary and secondary sources.

[339]

I have resorted to hermeneutics, discourse analysis, and comparative methods for historical purposes. However, the goal here was neither to reveal new facts nor to falsify the existing historical data. Instead, I intended to carry out a discursive analysis of the sources in order to understand the ideological position of the institutional subject who produces them.

The methodological core of this work is a confluence of diachronic analysis and categorization. Therefore, when reading the documents, emphasis was placed on the turning points during the period of nine years that the research covered and on the selection and categorization of the most visible trends (views and interests). The result of this twofold process was the identification of four distinct phases/topics of the American view of the Church. The headings of this paper suggest the focal points of the American diplomatic service during a particular phase. However, it should be noted that these phases are analytical constructs and an inevitable overlapping prevails.

The Dangerous Church

In the mid-1960s, in a context marked by the Cuban Revolution and the National Security doctrine, the progressive wing of the Brazilian Catholic Church was commonly accused of political radicalism and proximity to “dangerous” groups.¹⁵ Accusations centered on the leaders of the Movement for Basic Education (*Movimento de Educação de Base* —MEB—), Catholic Action groups, and progressive bishops like Dom Hélder Câmara, but particularly on Catholic student organizations.¹⁶

14. Since all archival data used here belong to the same series, record group and repository, information on those levels is given at the end of the paper whereas in citing I will reference through information of the record item and the file unit.

15. Antoine 26.

16. MEB was a rural literacy program created by the Catholic Church and financed by the pre-dictatorship governments which spread over several states and reached

[340]

In much the same way, the concerns of the U.S. diplomatic mission in Brazil went along the lines of McCarthyism. A cable from Rio de Janeiro dated January 3 1964 reported the dissemination, during the previous month, of a draft letter in which the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (*Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil* —CNBB—) strongly warned Catholic Action and its secretary, Bishop Dom Cândido Padim, of any involvement in politics and condemned any deviation from Christian dogma.¹⁷ This was another attempt by the Catholic hierarchy to distance the Catholic University Youth (*Juventude Universitária Católica* —JUC—) from the group known as Popular Action (*Ação Popular* —AP—).¹⁸

The cable states that the Church “has decided that cooperation with the Marxist, theoretically non-Communist Popular Action is more likely to aid Communism than the Church.” The comment contains some elements that characterized the American view on the Church during those years. National Security doctrine combines a paternalistic discourse that negates the moral agency of individuals and a Manichean view of the world as ultimately divided between communism and evil, on the one hand, and capitalist democracy and goodness, on the other.

Thus, Brazilian churchmen are regarded here as naïve and potential vehicles for communists who are malicious enough to deceive and manipulate unwary people for their own ends. The old bishops or the young and pious priests would almost unconsciously be embroiled in the national debacle in Brazil. In this way, the National Security discourse transformed the most progressive sectors of society into gullible victims at the service of hidden forces. A concomitant linguistic step transformed these supposedly naïve citizens into dangerous suspects. And in the dirty war of the 1960s and 1970s, suspect was usually equal to guilty.

In the aftermath of the March 31 *coup d'état* that put the military in power, the U.S.A. was attentive to the Church's reception of the new government.

more than half a million people.

17. John Keppel, Counselor for Political Affairs, to Department of State, Report “Brazilian Archbishops Order Lay Catholic Groups to Cease Leftist Activities”, Rio de Janeiro, Jan. 3, 1964, file POL 15-7.
18. A movement within Catholic Action, the JUC grouped catholic university students from all Brazil to live and spread their faith in the university context. After the Cuban Revolution, the JUC went through a process of rapid politicization. AP, on the other hand, a Christian-leftist oriented political organization, was born within the JUC itself in 1962.

An official CNBB statement was released on June 2 expressing gratitude and praising the military for their heroic role in the struggle against communism. Furthermore, the episcopate recognized the presence in its congregation of “victims of their own idealism.” The bishops were referring directly to the most progressive sectors of the Church in the same paternalistic manner typical of National Security. Nonetheless, at the same time they expressed uneasiness for the already evident hostilities against the Church and rejected the generalizing accusations of communism against Catholic Action and the MEB.¹⁹

[341]

Four months into the dictatorship, the Foreign Service reported on a document entitled “Misery in Latin America: Fate or Wrong-Doing?” Issued by Catholic students and directed to the churchmen meeting in the Vatican Council, the paper addressed the economic and social problems of the time. “The falling prices of raw materials, the rise in cost of manufactured goods, U.S.-tied procurement — all the old and often-disproved charges — are used as points of attack on the U.S. for ‘economic injustice,’” noted the cable. To the American officers, this represented “nationalist and anti-American propaganda” and an indication that after the first wave of military repression, “leftist Catholic groups” were becoming “vocal” again.²⁰

Church-State Relations

Gradually, a public confrontation between Catholic progressives and the military arose. The Catholic Action groups at the center of the conflict were highly critical of the socioeconomic direction of the country and recurrent targets of repression. A cable dated June 1965 reported the release of a “manifesto” by the Worker’s Catholic Action (*Ação Católica Operária* —ACO—) group of São Paulo that denounced the situation of unemployment in the city. A few days later, Cardinal Dom Agnelo Rossi, archbishop of São Paulo, made a statement that “removed much of the ammunition from the hands of those who could have used the ACO manifesto against the government.” The cable also reported the arrest and mistreatment of a priest and two students in the town of Goiás Velho during a protest: “Although *physical*

19. Robert W. Dean, Counselor of Embassy, to Department of State, Report “Bishop’s Declaration on Revolution”, Brasília, Jun. 10, 1964, file POL 15-7.

20. Niles W. Bond, Minister Consul General, to Department of State, Report “Reappearance of Leftist Anti-American Propaganda From Catholic Church Sources”, São Paulo, Aug. 13, 1964, file POL 15-7.

punishment [italics added] was employed, there is no evidence of any anti-Church campaign.”²¹ Arguably, the repressive violence is almost disregarded, whereas the main concern is the respectability of the regime.

[342] The cable described other skirmishes, suggesting that the “leftist press,” such as the newspaper *Ultima Hora*, had enormous responsibility for stirring up Church-State conflict when talking about torture and persecution. The most remarkable element in the situation was that this alleged conflict was to be used in “anti-government attacks.” In sum, the American view of Church-State relations, as the conflict began, involved a total identification with the preoccupations of the regime itself, namely the political cost of a conflict with the Church.

In July of 1966, when the National Union of Students (*União Nacional dos Estudantes* —UNE—) had its national congress in Belo Horizonte, the religious orders took measures to protect them from state repression and let the students use their facilities to carry out the meeting. Meanwhile, the bishops of the Northeast, headed by Dom Hélder Câmara, bishop of Olinda and Recife, gave clear indications of their support to progressive grassroots by endorsing two documents of Catholic Action groups, ACO-Recife and the Catholic Agrarian Youth (*Juventude Agrária Católica* —JAC—). The documents consisted of analyses of the socioeconomic situation of northeastern peasants and workers that entailed criticisms of the *status quo*. The final document, approved by the bishops, came to be known as the “Manifesto of the Bishops of the Northeast.” The American officers regarded the protection of the students in Belo Horizonte and the manifesto of the bishops as “examples of the increasing activity of the Church in Brazilian political affairs.”²²

Another report, issued during those days demonstrates the American concern for the attention the Church-State conflict was receiving in the media. Dom Hélder and his supporters in the episcopate were depicted as belligerents, who kept the scandal alive with new statements and declarations. The apparent American concern about the press coverage of these conflicts was actually a concern for the stability of the regime: “What began as a relatively mild protest over conditions in the Northeast has by inept local

21. Joseph F. Becelia, Third Secretary, to Department of State, Report “Alleged Coolness in Church-State Relations Used in Anti-Government Attacks”, Rio de Janeiro, Jun. 29, 1965, file POL 15-7.

22. U.S. Embassy, to Department of State, Report, Rio de Janeiro, Aug. 19, 1966, file POL 2-1.

military action and inadequate defensive measures on the national level been blown up far beyond its real importance. The opposition has naturally made the most of it.”²³ Interestingly enough, for the U.S.A, the Brazilian military was incapable of dealing with certain problems and at times their ineptitude contributed to worsening the conflict.

In 1968, the progressive bishops became more critical of the socio-economic problems of Brazil and opted decisively for protecting the students from repression. After the murder of student Edson Luis de Lima Souto and the ensuing wave of student mobilizations, U.S. officers were attentive to the relationship between the Church and students. In June, a cable from Recife concluded:

[343]

There is growing evidence that the Church in the Northeast is moving toward closer identification with student activists. In the past six weeks no less than five leading churchmen have by word and deed demonstrated their support for reform-minded university students. While most of the prelates involved are associated with the “progressive” wing of the Church which has frequently been out of step with the rest of the Church hierarchy, they in this instance at least, are believed to reflect the feelings of a growing cross section of their fellow churchmen.²⁴

The Consulate in Recife became even more worried about the Northeast Church after a study on the socioeconomic problems of Latin America, criticisms of the U.S.A. included, by Belgian priest Joseph Comblin was published.²⁵ Outraged, the military increasingly focused on foreign priests. The U.S. diplomats concluded that if the government was to “employ expulsion as a routine device to dispense with foreign ecclesiastics who express public opposition to it,” the strategy would produce very different outcomes. In

23. U.S. Embassy, to Department of State, Report, Rio de Janeiro, Aug. 26, 1966, file POL 2-1.

24. U.S. Consulate General, to U.S. Embassy Brazil, Brasilia, Report “Church Leaders in Northeast Move Toward Closer Identification With Reform-Minded Students”, Recife, May 29, 1968, enclosed in John W. Tuthill, Ambassador, to Department of State, Report “The Church and the Students in the Northeast”, Brasilia, Jun. 7, 1968, file POL 13.

25. U.S. Consulate, to U.S. Embassy, Brasilia, Report “Allegedly Subversive Study Prepared by Belgian Priest Generates Controversy in Northeast”, Recife, Jun. 21, 1968, enclosed in John W. Tuthill, Ambassador, to Department of State, Report “Priest’s study of social problems creates controversy”, Brasilia, Jul. 3, 1968, file POL 13.

fact, this report suggests that the foreign priests would deliberately resort to provocation to foster a Church-State crisis, and repression would be opportunistically used to reinforce opposition to the regime.²⁶

[344]

On December 13, 1968, the hard-line sectors of the military forced Institutional Act Number 5 (*Ato Institucional 5* —AI-5—) stiffening censorship, restricting civil liberties and giving unprecedented powers to the repressive apparatus.²⁷ We have seen how the American diplomats had long disdainfully observed the tactlessness of the Brazilian military. To them, the hardening of the authoritarian character of the regime was also a consequence of the military's ineptitude.

The U.S.A. was highly interested in the attitude of the Church toward the AI-5. At the request of the northeastern bishops, an extraordinary meeting of the CNBB was held in February 1969 to establish the Church's position. The resulting document covered the broad plurality of the Church; it expressed deep concern about the consequences the AI-5 would have on the human rights situation in Brazil and regretted the "existing misinterpretation and incomprehension concerning the activities of the Church in our country, even if there has been imprudence -which we equally regret." Furthermore, the bishops expressed desire for both a rapid re-democratization and collaboration with the government. In spite of the different elements of the document and the myriad of likely interpretations, for the U.S.A., the CNBB declaration represented a truce in some respects.²⁸ Nevertheless, the conflict continued.

In May 1969, a young priest and close associate of Dom Hélder, Antônio Henrique Pereira da Silva Neto was tortured and murdered. The authorities did their utmost to divert the investigation and distract public attention. In the communications of the Consulate in Recife about the crime, the U.S. diplomats show an almost nonexistent capacity to distrust the diverting

26. U.S. Embassy, to Department of State, Report "Brazilian Bishops to Meet in March", Rio de Janeiro, Feb. 4, 1969, file POL 15-7.

27. Maria Helena Moreira Alves, *State and Opposition in Military Brazil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) 95-96.

28. "Declaration by members of the Central Commission of the CNBB -Presence of the Church", enclosed in U.S. Embassy, to Department of State, Report "Declaration by Brazilian Bishops on National Situation", Rio de Janeiro, Mar. 14, 1969, file POL 15-7. The bishops' statement was presented to President Costa e Silva on February 21 by Cardinal Dom Jaime de Barros Câmara and Dom Aloísio Lorscheider.

thesis of the authorities who very quickly presented the murder as a crime of passion.²⁹

Instead, there was concern for an intensification in Dom Hélder's denunciations against the government: "Dom Hélder likely to regard incident as consistent with alleged strategy to have him shifted by Church even if military authorities opposed to this sort of terrorist action." To the U.S.A., the causes for the crime and its connections with a state of terror in Brazil were not as important as its effect on public opinion and the strain it could bring to Church-State relations.³⁰

[345]

Collaboration for Social Change

The American interest in the Brazilian Church made a significant leap in 1969. Of 167 documents and 552 pages issued in the period between 1964 and 1972 related to the Church, 61 documents and 249 pages correspond to that year. At the same time, we start to see a new American approach towards the Church, one of friendly terms and a desire for collaboration. The initial timid attitude of the hierarchy towards the AI-5 contributed to this shift.

Nevertheless, a consensus around a more defensive stand was taking shape among the bishops. In a conversation with American officers, Cardinal Dom Agnelo Rossi expressed his preference for a "middle-of-the-road position" of the Church in regards to the regime and criticized Dom Hélder for "provoking" the government and for his inappropriate criticisms of capitalism and U.S. policy. At the same time, the prelate expressed disagreement with the conservatives in the Church who favored the hard-line military "one-hundred-percent." Rossi's attitude, though conciliatory and moderate, was also characterized by a strong *esprit de corps*.³¹ Whether pushed by the *paulista* clerics or motivated by the need of a stronger stance with respect

29. U.S. Consulate, to U.S. Embassy, Rio de Janeiro, Telegram 542 "Priest Murdered in Recife", Recife, May 28, 1969, file POL 15-7.

30. U.S. Consulate, to U.S. Embassy, Rio de Janeiro, Telegram 571 "Murdered Priest in Recife", Recife, Jun. 6, 1969, file POL 15-7.

31. William L. Wight JR., Deputy Principal Officer and John D. Blacken, Political Officer, Memorandum of conversation "Views of Cardinal Archbishop Rossi, and Meeting of Central Committee National Council Brazilian Bishops", São Paulo, Feb. 20, 1969, enclosed in U.S. Consulate, to Department of State, Report "Bishops' Declaration on Political Situation; Views of Cardinal Archbishop Dom Agnelo Rossi", São Paulo, Feb. 28, 1969, file POL 15.

to the regime, the bishop had refused the National Order of Merit medal the generals had awarded him.

[346] The primary element of the emerging American approach to the Church was a systematic effort to understand it more deeply. During 1969, the Church in Latin America was subject to close observation as indicated by a cable from the State Department in April of that year that asks all posts in the area for a systematic “intelligence estimate” on the Church:

In particular, our interest is so far focused upon 1 the internal structure of the Church, its various factions and leaders as they relate to the problems of social, economic, and political development; 2 the social doctrines of the Church as they are interpreted by the Latin clergy, and particularly as they relate to reform, the development process, and violence as a means to achieve change; and 3 the alliances and relations with other groups, such as political parties, labor organizations, youth groups, and the military. We hope to reach some conclusions on the political and social significance of the Church in Latin America and the ways in which it is a force for and against various kinds of development there.³²

This cable can be taken as a point of convergence of different American views of the Church. On the one hand, the logics of the National Security doctrine are still present, particularly in the second point that suggests churchmen are probably inclined to use violence. Nevertheless, the Church is also seen here as an agent for development and a likely ally of the United States. In Brazil, this new view would be recurrent in the following years and it gradually diminished the vehemence of the National Security ideology in the cables. Beyond any ideological position of the State Department, what remains clear is a deep interest in the Catholic Church, regarded as an actor of major relevance and influence in Latin American politics.

In mid-1969, the American agents in Brazil issued four major reports on the Church. Two of them dealt exclusively with the Northeast. The first came from Recife in July. The general framework of the cable was the American need to seek dialogue with sectors disposed to and capable of social change in the Northeast. The military and the economic elites were major forces, but the cable judged them unlikely to be inclined to social change. Since

32. Department of State, to all ARA diplomatic posts (not including independent British areas or Guyana), Airgram “The Church in Latin America”, Washington, Apr. 30, 1969, file POL 15-7. All underlining in the original.

the establishment of AI-5, the political class of the region had been affected by political sanctions and cast out from the exercise of power, students had been hit by punitive actions, organized labor was weak and divided, and the media had been censored.

Thus, the Church emerged as the most important actor for social change in the Northeast “simply by the process of elimination.” The report advocated for “priority attention” to the northeastern Church “both as a potential important political force affecting Brazil’s future and as a potential agent for significant social change.” In a pragmatic way, the cable asserts:

[347]

Despite outward appearances, we have found many churchmen willing and even eager to engage in meaningful dialogue, and some to be susceptible to influence. [...] The extensive links of churchmen through the region, within Brazil, and abroad, not only give our efforts here a potentially large multiplier effect, but it may also open alternative avenues of approach to this group.³³

The State Department wanted to use the strengths of the Church to penetrate Brazilian society. Another extensive report, 17 pages long, on the northeastern Church was issued in August. It described the relevance of the Church in the Northeast, its inner debates, finances, the functioning of the institutional structure and the relation with other sectors, including the military. Although this cable, like the previous one, still shows the sort of concern characteristic of the National Security doctrine, it also depicted the Church mainly as a force for modernization and development in the Northeast. A highly important element in this report is the focus on all the aspects related to the priesthood. It delved into the “crisis in the recruitment of priests,” the consequent relevance of the foreign clergy, and even the political postures of the priests according to their nationalities.³⁴

A third major report came in September and broadened the perspective from the Northeast to the whole country. This 27-page cable presented the Church as a likely key factor “in the solution of the country’s pressing political and social problems.”³⁵ The officers gathered information about

33. U.S. Consulate, to Department of State, Report “Consulate General Seeks Broadened Dialogue With Northeast Churchmen”, Recife, Jul. 30, 1969, file POL 15-7.

34. U.S. Consulate, to Department of State, Report “The Church in the Northeast – Part I: The Catholic Church,” Recife, Aug. 22, 1969, file POL 15-7.

35. Charles Elbrick, Ambassador, to Department of State, Report “Church Project: The Catholic Church”, Rio de Janeiro, Sep.5, 1969, file POL 15-7.

the native and the foreign priesthood, the recruitment of priests, Church attendance, the role of the laity, Catholic educational and labor policies and the ecumenical movement. The U.S.A. was aware of the problem of massive abandonment of the priesthood, particularly among young and progressive priests, who were feeling frustrated by the difficulties in implementing the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

[348]

A fourth major report, delivered from Recife in October, reveals the cause of the American curiosity about the crisis of the priesthood, the situation of the foreign priests, and the diverse elements of clergy recruitment. On the basis of the perception of the Church's "significant potential as an agent of development and social change," and taking into account "the many setbacks and frustrations which individual clergymen endure in their difficult and frequently misunderstood social-action oriented pastoral activities," the cable outlined a likely U.S.A.-Church cooperation.

Such a cooperation would consist of American assistance in the training of priests for development and would count on the participation of the American Catholic Church, universities and other institutions. Certainly, the increasing interest of the State Department and other agencies in the situation of the foreign clergy and the priesthood crisis during 1969 was pragmatic. At the conjunction between the priesthood crisis and the growing importance of the Church after the AI-5, the U.S.A. saw an opportunity to penetrate and influence Brazilian society through American religious missions and training, probably through USAID.³⁶

Clearly, in 1969 the language of National Security gave way to a spirit of collaboration for social change and development. American officers now seemed interested in changing some negative perceptions that Brazilian churchmen had of the U.S. government. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the new "collaboration for social change" approach was chiefly focused on the Northeast, where the Church was more progressive and likely to criticize the U.S.A. The American agencies were trying to encourage their own conception of social change in this threatening region to counteract the relevance of the most progressive views.

36. Donor M. Lion, Consul General and Associate Director of USAID, to several in Rio de Janeiro, Recife and Washington, Report "Proposals for a Possible U.S. Role in the Training of Clergymen for Development", Recife, Oct. 1, file POL 15-7.

Church and Human Rights

In November of 1969, after the arrest and torture of Dominican friars from São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul, the bishops refrained from public and open confrontation with the military. Although some U.S. officers understood the “prudence” of the Church as a blow to the progressives, a strong Catholic discourse and praxis of protection of human rights was emerging.

The new attitude of moderation and concern for human rights defense was a consequence of the repression that was successfully undermining the grassroots of the progressive bishops; consequently, the conservatives gained more room for maneuvering to prevent institutional denunciations of social calamities. At the same time, thanks to the incapacity of the repressive apparatus to distinguish between progressive and non-progressive churchmen, the hierarchy started to feel that the persecution was directed toward the entire institution. In 1969-1970, the Foreign Service took notice of signals of disappointment with the government from bishops commonly held to be conservatives.³⁷

A central pillar of the Church’s praxis in the defense of human rights was the Brazilian Commission for Justice and Peace, officially created in October 1969.³⁸ This enterprise helped transform the perception of the Brazilian Church from an institution that inappropriately got involved in politics, into a champion of human rights and a legitimate institutional dissident.

The international denunciation of human rights violations particularly enraged the military, who intensified the persecution of Catholic organizations in the second half of 1970. At the height of the persecution, in October, the police broke into the offices of the Jesuit Brazilian Development Institute (*Instituto Brasileiro de Desenvolvimento* —IBRADES—) in Rio de Janeiro and detained its occupants, including the general secretary of the CNBB, Bishop Dom Aloísio Lorscheider. Repression was already having an international cost by this time. On October 17, Belgian Young Christian Workers demonstrated

[349]

37. John D. Blacken, Political Officer and Manoel Bezerra, Political Assistant, to Department of State, Brasilia and Rio de Janeiro, Memorandum of conversation with Auxiliary Archbishop of São Paulo Dom José Lafaiette Ferreira Alves “The Catholic Church, Its Role and Relationship With the Government”, São Paulo, Jan. 3, 1969, file POL 15-7; Stephen Low, Counselor of Embassy, to several posts, Memorandum of conversation with Archbishop Dom Fernando Gomes dos Santos, Brasilia, Feb. 6, 1970, file POL 15-7.

38. Cândido Mendes and Marina Bandeira, *Comissão Brasileira Justiça e Paz (1969-1995): empenho e memória* (Rio de Janeiro: Educam, 1996) 61.

in Brussels to urge the government and the Vatican to exert diplomatic and economic pressure on the Brazilian regime.³⁹

[350] Meanwhile, shifts within the Catholic hierarchy were taking place. In October of 1970, Bishop Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns replaced Cardinal Rossi as Archbishop of São Paulo after the latter was appointed director of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. In the archbishopric, Dom Evaristo would become one of the leading figures in the Church's mission to protect human rights. After the death of Cardinal Dom Jaime de Barros Câmara in February of 1971, Dom Eugênio de Araújo Sales replaced him as Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro and the latter was in turn replaced by Dom Brandão Vilela in Salvador de Bahia.

Also in February of 1971, new CNBB officers were elected. Dom Aloísio, bishop of Santo Angelo, succeeded Rossi in the presidency. His cousin Dom Ivo, auxiliary of Porto Alegre, succeeded Dom Aloísio as general secretary. Dom Avelar Brandão Vilela, president of the CELAM, was elected vice-president to replace conservative Dom Alfredo Vicente Scherer. Other important posts were also submitted to election, including the regional representatives to the National Conference.

In a 22-page-long report issued in September, Ambassador William Rountree highlighted the significance of Bishop Dom Aloísio's election as president of the Conference (he had been detained by the military in October of 1970). Moreover, Dom Ivo, the new secretary, was held as a progressive. The ambassador remarked on the issuance of several documents including a "proclamation presenting the basic orientation of the Church in today's Brazil," expressing consensus and setting guidelines for the role of the Church in the medium-term. Furthermore, the CNBB issued open letters supporting progressives like Dom Evaristo Arns, Dom Waldyr Calheiros and the Dominican Order of São Paulo, three symbols of the defense of human rights. A final aspect of the meeting, of deep symbolic importance, was perceived by the ambassador:

In a blunt challenge to the GOB, Dom Helder CAMARA, Archbishop of Olinda and Recife and outspoken leader of the progressive wing of the hierarchy (whose very name is anathema to the GOB), broke three

39. U.S. Embassy, to Department of State and others, Telegram 4660 "Belgian Demonstrators Protest Brazilian Arrests: Foreign Minister Supports Protesters", Brussels, Oct. 21, 1970, file POL 15-7.

years of silence vis-à-vis the Brazilian press. He did so dramatically by presenting a summary of the meeting and the various manifestos.⁴⁰

This important shift in the Church is consequence of the nature of the repression during the second half of 1970. In previous years, the bishops had been at least partially successful in negotiating and interceding for the victims by direct communication with the highest circles of the military establishment. In the previous months, however, the regime had been reluctant to accede to the petitions of the episcopate. Serbin points to the detention of Dom Aloísio as an event that forced the bishops, historically accustomed to social privileges, to take a more active position of defense.⁴¹

[351]

During these years, the transnational power of the Church became a major problem for the regime. The case of the priest Gerson da Conceição de Almeida is very indicative in this regard. In a cable from Washington in July of 1972, Democratic Senator Fred Harris, who had joined Senator Frank Church as a critic of U.S. aid to the Brazilian generals, requested information about the priest, his health, and his family, apparently to contact them.⁴²

Father Gerson had been arrested along with four lay people in October of 1971 in the southeastern state of Espírito Santo. All of them belonged to a Catholic organization for social and educational assistance founded by the American priest Edmund Nelson Leising. Father Gerson was imprisoned in *Vila Militar*, Rio de Janeiro, without formal charges of any crime and was submitted to torture along with his friends. Leising himself informed American officers in Rio of these events. They added: "Embassy feels that extreme GOB sensitivity to what it would view as unwarranted interference in its internal affairs by USG precludes providing all of above unconfirmed information to Senator Harris, particularly if he intends to release and attribute it to either department and/or US embassy Brazil."⁴³ Hence, the officers suggested caution in this regard.

40. William Rountree, Ambassador, to Department of State, Report "The Catholic Church in Brazil, First Half of 1971", Rio de Janeiro, Sep. 9, 1971, file POL 15-7. All underlining in the original.

41. Serbin 87-88.

42. Department of State, to U.S. Embassy, Brasilia, Telegram 8346 "Congressional Inquiry", Washington, July 26, 1972, file POL -29.

43. U.S. Consulate to Department of State, Telegram 8497 "Senator Harris Inquiry", Rio de Janeiro, Jul. 31, 1972, file POL 29.

[352]

This cable shows some ironic changes in the three-fold relations among the U.S.A., the Brazilian regime and the Church. Trapped by their own excesses, and internationally recognized as torturers, the military would at times perceive even the U.S.A. as a threat in matters of criticisms of human rights violations. By contrast, for the U.S.A, the Church became an international champion for human rights rather than the dangerous institution they perceived back in 1964.

Conclusions

In the second half of the 1960s, the Brazilian Catholic Church was under intense observation by the American Foreign Service. In 1964, the U.S.A. regarded the Church as a dangerous institution, which is consistent with the growing progressivism within important Catholic segments and the prevailing National Security doctrine that characterized American relations with Latin America.

Until 1968, the American interest and view of the Church was determined by the United States' political and ideological commitment to the regime. Thus, the Foreign Service showed concern about the Church-State public confrontations because they undermined the legitimacy of the military regime. In stark contrast, raids, detentions, torture and other sorts of state violence against Catholics did not seem to concern the State Department as long as they did not result in public confrontations.

As the bulwark of the progressive movement, the Church of the Northeast was closely watched. Dom Hélder Câmara deserves special mention: his deeds and words in Brazil and abroad were carefully examined in cables that exude disapproval and even animosity. The sympathies between churchmen and students were of great concern as well.⁴⁴ However, as post-AI-5 repression crushed the student movement, from 1969 on the connections between the Church and students ceased to be of American interest.

Actors within the Church, like right-wingers Dom Geraldo de Proença Sigaud and Dom Antônio de Castro Mayer, who did not represent a threat to the military regime garnered scarce attention. Tradition, Family and Property (*Tradição, Família e Propriedade* —TFP—) was recognized as an

44. The same concern had the Brazilian security organisms as shown by Mendes de Souza 274.

“ultra-rightwing” and “arch-conservative” Catholic movement that counted on the support of the regime but was regarded disdainfully by the U.S. officers.⁴⁵

It is illustrative that, according to Lernoux, both international public knowledge of human rights abuses and gradual autonomy of the repressive Latin American apparatuses may have influenced the CIA to turn to a “lower profile” in the region during the 1970s.⁴⁶ In the same line, Green shows how after the AI-5, thanks to American-Brazilian anti-authoritarian networks, the topic of torture and repression in Brazil gained more attention in the press and public opinion. This would lead to U.S. Congress debates on cutting military aid to Brazil for humanitarian reasons in 1971-1972, as well as to Senator Frank Church’s audiences of May 1971 on the involvement of American resources in acts of human rights violations.⁴⁷

[353]

Fico alerts against a likely overvaluation of the repression as a cause for a real change of the American stand towards the regime. He points to economic considerations and international circumstances as sources for the gradual cooling of initial decisive support from the U.S.A.⁴⁸ When it comes to the Church, it is safe to say that, directly and indirectly, the hardening of repression was key in the American change of perception we have just witnessed.

In the aftermath of the AI-5, the U.S.A. pragmatically initiated a search for productive relations with other segments of Brazilian society.⁴⁹ Sooner or later, the military would go back to the barracks and those sectors would take back their positions as legitimate actors in a formally democratic society. As a prime order institution, with a national scope that crossed regions, classes and political ideas, the Church came to be considered a fundamental element for development and a potential valuable ally of the U.S.A. in Brazil. Not only that, totalitarian repression in the post-AI-5 situation left the Church as the one standing antagonist of the regime. Therefore, in 1969, cables reveal a growing effort to establish relations with the Church in terms of collaboration for social change or in other words, intervention for development.

The new friendly American attitude was reinforced in 1970-1971 by internal developments within the Church. As the repression targeted the

45. Inspired by the *corporativista* and fascist regimes of Franco and Oliveira Salazar in the Iberian Peninsula, TFP promoted catholic authoritarianism based on romantic and pre-secular ideals.

46. Lernoux 282.

47. Green 233-254.

48. Fico 236, 278.

49. Green 95.

grassroots, the Church turned to its bishops, abandoned public confrontations and focused on human rights issues.⁵⁰ Moreover, internal rearrangements within the hierarchy put the most committed bishops at the height of the Brazilian church.

[354]

This came as a consequence of the hardening of repression. By indiscriminately targeting churchmen as threatening progressives, the military unintentionally strengthened the Catholic *esprit de corps* and empowered those sectors most sensitive to human rights violations. The regime, on the other hand, faced increasing international disapproval as authoritarian and a massive violator of human rights.

These changes in perception also show how the press, the international denunciation movement, in which the Church played a central role, and realignments of the Brazilian political context influenced American foreign policy in Brazil. Finally, American interest in the Brazilian Catholic Church during the first half of the military regime offers a glimpse of the international aspect of religious communities and their relations with other political actors.

WORKS CITED

I. Primary Sources

Archives

U.S. National Archives, College Park (Maryland), United States of America
Record Group 84: Records of Foreign Service Posts of the Department of
State, Classified Central Subject Files, U.S. Embassy Brazil, Entry P-72.

II. Secondary Sources

Antoine, Charles. *Church and Power in Brazil*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973.

50. The focus on human rights was a logical outcome of the AI-5. After a few years, however, the Church would take back its ties with other progressive sectors of society and rebuild its critical stance towards the economic policies of the regime. Already in 1973, sectors of the Church were taking clear stances against capitalism; Löwy 87.

- Bruneau, Thomas. *The Church in Brazil: The Politics of Religion*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982.
- Fico, Carlos. *O grande irmão: da operação Brother Sam aos anos de chumbo. O governo dos Estados Unidos e a ditadura militar brasileira*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2008.
- Green, James. *We Cannot Remain Silent: Opposition to the Brazilian Military Dictatorship in the United States*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Itagyba, Renata. "O Brasil ditatorial nas páginas do *New York Times* (1964-1985)". Masters dissertation in Communication. São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 2013.
- Lernoux, Penny. *Cry of the People: United States Involvement in the Rise of Fascism, Torture, and Murder and the Persecution of the Catholic Church in Latin America*. Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1980.
- Levine, Daniel. "Religion and Politics, Politics and Religion: An Introduction". *Churches and Politics in Latin America*. Ed. Daniel Levine. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1979. 16-40.
- Löwy, Michael. *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America*. London: Verso, 1996.
- Mainwaring, Scott. *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil, 1916-1985*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986.
- Mendes, Cândido and Marina Bandeira. *Comissão Brasileira Justiça e Paz (1969-1995): empenho e memória*. Rio de Janeiro: Educam, 1996.
- Mendes de Souza, Admar. "Estado e Igreja católica. O movimento social do cristianismo de libertação sob vigilância do DOPS/SP (1954-1974)". Doctoral dissertation in Social History. São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, 2009.
- Moreira Alves, Márcio. *A Igreja e a política no Brasil*. São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1979.
- Moreira Alves, Maria Helena. *State and Opposition in Military Brazil*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985.
- Romero, Sigifredo. "The Progressive Catholic Church in Brazil, 1964-1972: The Official American View". Masters dissertation in Religious Studies. Miami: Florida International University, 2014.
- Serbin, Kenneth. *Secret Dialogues: Church-State Relations, Torture, and Social Justice in Authoritarian Brazil*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000.
- Skidmore, Thomas. *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964-85*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.