

FROM ANTAGONISM TO ADAPTATION: CATHOLICISM AND MODERNITY IN EARLY REPUBLICAN BRAZIL (1889–1930)

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Abstract: *This study examines the complex relationship between the Ultramontane Catholic Church and different forms of modernity in the context of the Brazilian First Republic (1889–1930). While the adjective “modern” turned into a discursive weapon to label and reject all kinds of criticized phenomena in Brazilian society (from “modern” literature, arts, theatre, or dances to “modern” – meaning secular – education), the representatives of the Brazilian Ultramontanism fully embraced scientific arguments and the mantle of progress, even adapting to certain aspects of the ideology of modernity promoted by their liberal competitors.*

Keywords: *Ultramontanism; Catholic Church; modernity; liberalism; Brazil*

Introduction

Ultramontanism as the dominant institutional form of 19th-century Catholicism has been persistently portrayed as staunchly rigid and “anti-modern” – standing firmly in opposition to the rapid societal, economic, and of course political changes initiated by the 1789 French Revolution, the subsequent Napoleonic Wars, and the liberal revolutions both in Europe and in its newly independent colonies.¹ For instance, Robson Filho and Felipe Araújo (2020, 1) described the

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“relationship between the Catholic Church and modernity – in its most varied aspects, theoretical, technical, and practical” as being in “conflict at least until the Second Vatican Council”. Paula Montero (1992, 90) also argued that “it was only since the Second Vatican Council [...] that the Catholic Church became capable of reconciling itself with modernity”.

Such interpretation is hardly surprising. After all, this was precisely the way the Catholic Church presented itself to the world at the very latest since the pontificate of Gregory XVI (1831–1846): as a defender of the often (re)invented “traditions” and a tireless critic of the so-called “errors” of the modern world that were so eloquently identified and condemned in the notorious *Syllabus of Errors* published in 1846 by Gregory’s successor, pope Pius IX (1846–1878). Catholic intellectuals and Church figures who sought to reconcile Catholicism with the nascent modern society were either purged or distanced themselves from the institution. At some occasions, they even created alternative church organizations, today commonly known as “Old Catholic” churches, especially after the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), which strengthened almost absolute papal powers, internal centralization, and anti-liberal rhetoric.

It could indeed be argued that the Ultramontane Church proudly assumed everything that Catholicism was accused of by the radical Enlightened philosophers and their 19th century successors, liberal freethinkers – it opposed “evil freedoms” of speech, thought, press and religion, denounced rationalism and certain scientific breakthroughs (especially Darwinism),² and strived to reconnect the Church and the State. Oded Heilbronner (2000, 468) calls this a “closed in” mentality, even using the metaphor of an intellectual Ultramontanist “ghetto” where opposition to modernity was used to “buttress” the imaginary walls of this church and solidify shared Catholic identity across the national borders. He writes:

The ghetto was partly created by the hostile surroundings, but also partly by the Church itself, whose leadership thought it could make use of the above social and political manifestations [such as Catholic sports, welfare, and charity associations, political parties, or trade unions] to create a unique Catholic-ultramontane environment (Heilbronner 2000, 470).

² For the early Catholic reaction to Darwin’s theory of evolution, see Artigas, Glick, and Martinez (2006).

A similar view of Ultramontane Catholicism as a “walled village” was expressed by Gabriel Daly (1985, 776–777), who argues that “in the period between the two Vatican Councils the Catholic Church resembled a village encompassed by a high wall which separated the villagers from the surrounding jungle”, in order to preserve “classical and medieval culture which, outside its walls in the surrounding terrain, had long since yielded to the advancing jungle of post-Enlightenment life and ideas”.

Many scholars have tended to go as far as to openly characterize the Ultramontane Catholicism as “backward”, surviving especially in economically underdeveloped areas,³ thus clearly painting the contrast with the “modern” non-Catholics (especially Protestants in German, British, and partially American contexts) that embraced the spirit of the era. This general notion can be traced at least to the Max Weber’s classics *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and *The Sociology of Religion*, both of which painted Catholicism as trapped in ritualist, magical, and pre-modern practices and dogmas (Turner and Forlenza 2020).

However, I believe that the relationship between the Ultramontane Church – even at its most “reactionary” point – and modernity was significantly more complex than the caricature of the complete opposition that was so often employed both by the liberals and by the Catholics themselves. In this article, I attempt to examine the often-schizophrenic Catholic attitudes towards modernity (or rather modernities, as discussed further) on the particular example of the Brazilian Catholic Church during the First Republic (1889–1930).

This is the first period in Brazilian history when the Roman Catholic Church lost its dominant position of the “state church” that it had enjoyed ever since the Portuguese colonization – and that it kept even after Brazil achieved independence in 1822 (Neves 2011). In 1889, however, a military coup – later misleadingly called a “revolution” – overthrew the emperor Pedro II (b. 1831–1899) and installed a republic openly inspired by liberal and secularist ideas (Mello 2009). Two years later, the Republican government adopted a new constitution that definitely stripped the Catholic Church of the status as the official Church of State and promulgated relative religious freedom.⁴

³ Heilbronner (2000, 466) himself writes that – in the German context – “the Catholic population tended to concentrate in backward areas – areas that, for most of the 19th century, industrial changes had passed by, areas that only toward the end of the century were connected to a railway”.

⁴ Some non-Christian religions such as the Spiritists remained frowned upon and the practicing of this religion was theoretically punishable by the 1890 penal code as a “crime against public health” (see Gomes 2013).

This radical break with the past put the Catholic Church in Brazil belatedly in a position similar to what it experienced in many European countries decades ago. But it also liberated the Church hierarchy from the tight grip of the royal control, shifted the decision-making from the emperor to the pope, and gave strong impulse to intellectual activities, especially the Catholic press that was supposed to be in the forefront of Brazil's spiritual reconquest.

In my analysis, I mainly rely upon what was published in the Catholic officially sanctioned press (or *boa imprensa* – literally the “good press”) regarding different aspects of modernity, specifically on three of the most influential journals – *Mensagem da Fé* from Bahia (published twice per month), and the magazines *A União* and *O Apóstolo* from Rio de Janeiro (published weekly). As these magazines published official documents and statements made by the Church hierarchy both in Brazil and Vatican but at the same time included countless opinion pieces written by the leading Catholic intellectuals from this period, I believe they provide reasonable insight into the internal discussions over the Catholic relationship with modernity in the Brazilian context.

Modernities

Terms such as “modernity” and “modern” have obviously been rather controversial and used to mean very different things.⁵ This is reflected in the Catholic press, which ascribes to them both positive and negative connotations, strongly depending on the context, as it is possible to see below. While the scholarly discussion on the meaning of “modernity” has been endless subject of debates ever since the 19th century, for the limited purpose of this article, I am referring to “modernity” as two distinct (even though on many levels interconnected) phenomena.

First and slightly less controversial is the sort of “objective modernity” – in Polanyi's (1985) words, “the great transformation” – that could be described as series of technological, social, economic, and political transformations experienced by numerous countries including Brazil over the course of the “long 19th century” and originally stemming from the first Industrial Revolution. These changes included varying degrees of industrialization and urbanization, breakthroughs in almost every area of scientific research, the rise of globalization,

⁵ See, e.g., Anderson Perry's (1986) useful distinction between “modernization”, “modernity”, and “modernism”.

organizational and administrative rationalization, and many others. While it is possible to debate the pace and social/geographic distribution of these radical changes, few would dispute that they indeed occurred,⁶ and contemporaries debated them and reacted to them, sometimes with a sense of excitement – and sometimes with considerable fear.⁷

I am referring to the second phenomenon as “liberal” or “ideological modernity”, which arose from the legacy of Enlightenment and the French Revolution and was explicitly formulated by 19th century liberals. Since a number of its principles continue to define our notion of “liberal democratic” societies and regimes, some scholars (e.g., José Casanova, 1994) tend to simply see them as defining features of the transformation to modernity. However, I agree with Talal Asad (2003), who emphasizes ideological and largely Western-centrist underpinnings of the process of modernization, describing this phenomenon as “a project or rather, a series of interlinked projects – that certain people in power seek to achieve” (ibid., 13).

In the 19th-century and early 20th-century context, these projects included endeavours to implement expanding number of principles such as various forms of democratic participation, universal rights and freedoms (such as freedom of religion, conscience, speech, and press), and secularism with the central, unifying idea of human “progress”. Protagonists of liberal modernity perceived history in linear terms, inevitably moving towards modern, more rational society in contrast with the “pre-modern”, irrational past that the new and modernized society seeks to overcome and even forget as part of the intellectual “dark ages” (O’Malley 2018).

Secularism is such an important constitutive component of this ideology that it has been sometimes referred to as “secular modernity”. Religion – and in the Western context particularly Catholicism with its miracles, transubstantiation, and other phenomena depending on belief and not on rational conclusions – has been considered responsible for a large part of the alleged irrationality of the old regime, from spreading “superstition” and magical practices among the general population to providing divine authority for absolute monarchs. As such, it is perceived as an obstacle to progress that must be removed from the public sphere by means of education and legislation (Asad 2003). For religion to be tolerated, it must be pushed away into the private sphere; in words of

⁶ See, for example, Clark 1986.

⁷ For a thorough examination of modern technological anxiety, see Mokyr, Vickers, Ziebarth (2015).

Casanova (1994, 40), “indeed the privatization of religion is essential to modernity”. Religion has also been generally perceived to be historically obsolete and doomed to eventually disappear due to the inevitable expansion of science and rationalism.

As Gordon Graham (1992, 185) explains:

The general theory of secularization [...] brings with it two important features entailed by the fact that history is a progressive development. First, the decline of religion is inevitable – it is a phase through which human beings have passed and which they have outgrown. Secondly, the decline of religion is desirable – in leaving religion behind we discard more primitive beliefs and practices and move to more enlightened ones.

Of course, the objective and ideological forms of modernity can never be entirely separated, especially in spaces colonized, contested, or threatened by European and American expansion since the Industrial Revolution. Belated industrialization and the formation of nation-states in some of the non-Western countries, for example, would have probably not happened in the same manner if they would not had been pushed by local reform-minded elites inspired by the ideology of Euro-American liberal modernization – and also had there not been the perception of a threat of those countries that achieved technological advancements earlier.⁸

Brazil certainly belongs to this group, since its political elites loudly decried the alleged “backwardness” of their country compared to the leaders of the industrial world, mainly United States, United Kingdom, and France (Patto 1999). They considered the slow pace of modernization in Brazil as a threat to its sovereignty, reason for widespread poverty, and source of national embarrassment on the international stage. When looking for those responsible for the sorry state of Brazilian affairs, they blamed the dominance of the Catholic Church, the legacy of the Portuguese colonization, and eventually the political system of monarchy (*ibid.*).⁹

⁸ The modernization in the Ottoman Empire would be a typical example of this case (see, for instance, Burçak 2008).

⁹ Brazil was the only long-standing monarchy in all of Latin America. Haiti also had self-proclaimed emperors between 1804–1806 and 1849–1859; and Mexico between 1864–1867 under the ill-fated rule of Habsburg Maximilian I.

While even the monarchy, especially under the emperor Pedro II, ostentatiously embraced the mantle of “modernization” in terms of material and technological progress,¹⁰ modernization clearly became the dominant political ideology of the Republican revolution in 1889 and *raison d’être* of its very existence – Maria Tereza Mello (2009, 15) went as far to declare that the “Republic was the Brazilian name for modernity”.

After all, it was at this time when Brazil adopted its famous motto “Order and Progress” (*ordem e progresso*), written on the new national flag, this time not referring simply to the progress in the sense of material improvement and adaptation of modern technologies (even though these were certainly significant part of the regime’s self-legitimization), but to a much broader program of transformation of the Brazilian society, such as “rationalizing” (i.e. secularizing) education, the enactment of religious freedom for Protestants and Spiritists, and the abolishment of privileges.

Nostalgic but Not Regressive

I begin the analysis by dealing with the Ultramontane attitudes towards the “objective” modernity. Yes, the Catholic press both in Brazil and in other affected countries times and times again expressed longing for the good old Ancien Régime as a period of harmony between classes, orderly rule of monarchs sanctioned by God’s grace, and high moral standards, as apparent from the following article written long decades after the fall of the empire:

[The Church and the State] shared the same aspirations for the entirety of three centuries. They built the Fatherland together, as brothers, making arts, combining their hard effort, building one nation. They were united in peace, helping each other to build. And they were strong in war, victorious together. They wrote one and only history, a glorious, splendid history. The history of Brazil (*Mensagem da Fé* 1927).

But the nostalgic rhetoric hardly coincided with any real intentions of restoring the previous status quo, even though the Catholic Church labelled itself as the

¹⁰ Pedro II attempted to project image of a benevolent and modern ruler inspired by European constitutional monarchies, passionate for bringing material and scientific progress (e.g., railway and electrification) to Brazil (Barman 2012).

last guardian of traditions. This is especially true in Brazil, where the Ancien Régime was extremely hostile to the Ultramontane ambitions since Brazilian emperors held unprecedented control over the Catholic Church as part of the so-called “royal patronage” (*padroado régio*).

Padroado, dating to the times of Late Medieval Portuguese monarchy, enabled the Brazilian emperor to name bishops, control religious orders, and pre-approve any papal directives – privileges that Pedro II used so extensively it led to major conflict with the bishops loyal to Rome known as Religious Question (*Questão religiosa*) in the 1870s (Souza 2013). In fact, it is now clearly established that Pedro II intended to enact strictly anti-Catholic legislation similar to the Republican reforms – but from the position of power and sovereignty over “his” Brazilian Church that could hardly oppose his directives (Leite 2011).

For this reason, the Catholic hierarchy both in Brazil and Rome initially saw the Republican coup d’état as an opportunity to free itself from the monarch’s tight grip and achieve organizational independence. And even though it later reversed its stance to idealize the previous regime as unifying Church and State, its imagined “return to the past” actually imagined completely different set of mutual relations – one based both on the Catholic Church’s independence and on its leadership in moral and religious matters. This model, proposed periodically in the Catholic press, did not even require return of the institution of the monarchy as the republic was proclaimed to be equally suitable political regime for it (Aquino 2012).

A similar nostalgia was on occasion expressed for the pre-industrial, agricultural society that was still partially preserved in the countryside – and Catholic journalists tended to criticize the immigrants coming to the large cities for leaving behind better, simpler lives closer to the Christian ideal of poverty (see, for example, *Mensagem da Fé* 1915). But at the same time, the Catholic press recognized the importance of material and technological progress for the society as a whole and increasingly focused on the workers as an important sector of society that needs to be Christianized and their living conditions improved (without fundamentally changing the capitalist model of relations between the workers and their employers).

Rather than attempting to recreate traditional society and reinstate the traditional state model, Ultramontane Catholicism wholly embraced new opportunities provided by the modern transformations and can be even perceived as a product of modernity itself. Organizationally, the very creation of a unified, global Church that sought to centralize decision-making into the hands of

the pope and his apparatus, eradicated any sorts of significant local liturgical practices and instead imposed “standardized” cults (e.g., Cult of the Sacred Heart, Holy Family), and the mirrored centralization of nation-states that is so intricately connected with the 19th century modernity (O’Malley 2018).

The openness of the Church to modern, transformational technologies is even more apparent, as the Brazilian Catholic journalists did not shy away from pointing out:

They claim that the Church is not in line with our times. But what is it opposed to? To the machines running on steam, to the works of electricity, to archaeological excavations, study of hieroglyphs, to X-Ray, radio, airships, or airplanes? The Church has never condemned any of these things. In contrary, it has lauded all the conquests of the human spirit (Do Carmo 1914).

Ultramontane Church itself masterfully employed modern technologies to mobilize masses and communicate with the outside world. After Pope Gregory XVI, who famously banned railways in the Papal States, his successors embraced modern technological tools, most importantly the press (or the so-called “modern pulpit”, as Catholic journalists called it – see, e.g., *Mensagem da Fé* 1913c), telegraph, and later radio. The press especially played a crucial role in communicating and promoting the outcomes of the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), which was paradoxically cantered around condemning various aspects of modernity. Other modern tools of mass mobilizations have been massively employed since the pontificate of Leo XIII (b. 1878–1903), such as lay associations of women or workers, leagues to push for specific causes (e.g., so-called Leagues for Morality in Brazil),¹¹ periodic Eucharistic congresses on national and transnational levels, Catholic political parties, and even banks.

All these tools were also used in Brazil and embraced by the local Church hierarchy – although typically with a delay both compared to Catholics in more developed countries (United States, United Kingdom), and also later in regard to its own ideological and religious competitors in Brazil, from secularist liberals, to Protestants and Spiritists. Establishing a successful Catholic press, for example, turned out to be continuous challenge for the hierarchy, having to catch up with other religious groups after being tightly controlled during the *Padroado* regime. Luckily for the hierarchy, their effort was significantly

¹¹ *Ligas pela moralidade* campaigned against alcohol, gambling, and “excessive” fashion.

boosted by foreign friars coming to Brazil mostly from Germany and Italy to revive religious orders that brought with them new technologies and established coordinating and fundraising organizations such as the Centre of the Good Press (Amaral 2011).

Organizational reforms that connected Brazilian Catholics to the Ultramontane Church also arrived late, after the monarchy was overthrown and the state ceased to meddle in religious affairs. This institutional restructuring in order to strengthen the Pope's control, known in Brazil as "Romanization" (*romanização*), was however undertaken swiftly, as can be demonstrated by the number of dioceses. While in 1889, there were only 12 dioceses for the entire Brazilian territory, their number rose more than fivefold until 1930, including 20 new dioceses in the first two decades of the "Old Republic" (Gomes 2008). Reforms also included reorganization of the religious orders and congregations that were effectively suffocated by Emperor Pedro II's ban on admitting new friars in 1855, the introduction of European devotions, and new missionary activities into Brazil's interior, and searching for additional sources of fundraising (Aquino 2012).

Internal reorganization also included financial and organizational support for mobilizing lay organizations of youths, women, and workers, based especially on Italian and French examples that finally came under the unifying umbrella of the Brazilian Catholic Action (*Ação Católica Brasileira*, or ACB) in 1935. In this way, the Brazilian Catholic Church caught up with modern forms of political organization and leadership that were successfully employed by other distinctively modern ideologies both home and abroad, from socialism to fascism,¹² and in the 1920s and 1930s achieved significant presence on the domestic political scene (Gomes 2008).

In the Name of "Progress" and "Science"

Accepting and even actively utilizing modern technologies is only one of the numerous instances when the Ultramontane Catholics appropriated important elements of the "objective" modernity. On other occasions, nominally "conservative" Catholics adopted this rhetoric, legitimizing their cause in Brazilian society based on promising "progress" while commonly using the support of (pseudo)scientific arguments and scientific authorities.

¹² In Brazil, the local variation of Fascism was called "Integralism" (*integralismo*).

“By its very nature, Catholicism is a powerful force of progress”, argued *Mensageiro* in an article tellingly called “Progress and civilization are inseparable from the Christian moral and religion”, stressing that “Catholicism and progress are intimately interconnected” (Coriolano 1919). Interestingly, Catholic authors are not referring merely to some sort of moral progress – but to actual *material* progress of both individuals and the country, as these would in the Church’s view certainly benefit from embracing Catholicism.

If we were religious people, we would have a strong, prosperous, and well-organized Brazil because our leaders would finally begin to implant order. And once these leaders would be men conscious of their religious purpose, there would be no more instances of disobedience, lack of organization in everything, unscrupulous management of finances and national property, lack of order in allotments, arbitrary behaviour of the government officials, and little education among the people, especially religious instruction (ibid.).

On other occasions, Catholic media stressed the prosperity achieved by the nations that embraced political Catholicism (such as Belgium, which allegedly became one of the most advanced nations precisely because of the dominance of the Catholic Church), while the anti-Catholic governments brought their nations into a dire material situation (see, for instance, *A União* 1913).

The Brazilian Catholic press fought also quite vigorously against being called “obscurantists, backward, and fierce” by their enemies – in other words, against being anti-modern and anti-scientific (see *O Apóstolo* 1890). Countless articles were published to defend the Catholic Church as perfectly rational and more than compatible with contemporary science.

For instance, in an article titled “Is the Catholic Church Still for Our Times”, *A União* was keen to convince its readers that the Ultramontane church fully embraces science – but only the “true science”, not the “so-called modern science, founded upon impious ideas and hypotheses of ungodly scholars” (Do Carmo 1914). The author of this text basically monopolizes science for Catholicism by claiming that all the great scientists believed in God. *Mensageiro da Fé* even provided this common argument with statistics, compiled by a certain Dr. Dennert in Germany in 1895:

Between the 16th and 17th centuries, 79 out of 81 leading scientists were believers. In the 18th century, only 5 men of science were atheist or indifferent to religion.

And in the last century, a famous century of enlightenment and a century of science, 124 out of 169 of the most important scientists believed in God. Only 12 were atheist and 27 didn't hold any religious view (*Mensagem da Fé* 1908b).

By distinguishing between a “real science” based in faith in God and an acceptance of his almighty power, and a “fake science” misguided by atheism and personal moral flaws of the individual scientist, Brazilian Catholics attempted to navigate the delicate balance between fully embracing the practical conquests of the modern era while also defending all the traditional beliefs questioned by their rationalist opponents, such as miracles.¹³ Most importantly, it enabled them to discard any theory that (at least at that time) seemed to contradict Catholic theology, perhaps most importantly Darwin's theory of evolution, which became a frequent target of mockery and criticism in the Brazilian “good press”.

“If perhaps some of our readers are aware of being descended from an ape, we do not intend to question him any further because we prefer not to meddle in family issues”, wrote an anonymous Catholic journalist in 1913 in an extensive piece published in order to refute the evolutionary theory (*Mensagem da Fé* 1913b). While using moral arguments against the theory, such as criticizing the alleged “materialism” of its proponents and calling them the “apostles of humans' animalization”, he mostly used again the “science” argumentation by claiming that “many more scientists refused it than accepted it” – and that among those who supported the theory, there were “almost no first-rate scientists” (*ibid.*).

Rather than merely appealing to faith- and moral-based arguments, the Brazilian “good press” commonly used arguments based on science to prove their point, thus using exactly the same strategy as their ideological opponents that claimed to be the true representatives of the modern era and accused Catholics of being backward and anti-modern. Science-based (and obviously in many cases, in retrospect, *pseudoscientific*) arguments were used in almost every cause important for the Brazilian Catholics during the First Republic – for instance against proposals of legalizing divorce, as apparent from the following article from 1907.

The divorce manifests all the signs of degeneration, as demonstrated in the most recent German statistics. [...] In Saxony, the number of suicides is five times

¹³ For specific defence of miracles, see, for example, *O Apóstolo* 1900.

higher among those divorced than among the rest of the population. In Bavaria, this number is six times higher. In Prussia, among one million married women, there are 61 suicides – and 348 cases of suicide among one million divorced ones (*Mensagem da Fé* 1907b).

While statistics (as shown above) were an especially popular tool for their argumentation, Catholic journalists also often used references to scientific authorities, such as certain “American sociologist Anne Rogers”, which helped them to argue why European marriages were generally happier than the ones in the United States – reason was, of course, accessibility of divorce in the US (*Mensagem da Fé* 1908a). “Experts” were used in order to support arguments against gambling, alcoholism, and even “modern dances”,¹⁴ but probably none of these appeared more urgent than the arguments against one of the principal religious competitors of the Brazilian Catholic Church at the time: the Spiritists.

The preoccupation with Spiritism is quite specific for the Brazilian context, both because of its strongly religious (and specifically Catholic) appeal and because of its prevalence in Brazilian society;¹⁵ in fact, even today, Brazil has by far the largest Spiritist population worldwide, and Catholics continued to wage campaigns against it long after World War II.¹⁶ Brazilian Spiritists specifically claimed to be the modern version of Christianity, deprived of all “irrational” elements,¹⁷ thus directly challenging the Catholic Church. Furthermore, local Spiritists appealed to the educated (i.e., literate and therefore eligible to vote) sections of Brazilian society that the Catholics deemed essential to regaining religious hegemony.

¹⁴ So-called “modern dances” referred to here in particular are the tango, the maxixe, and the foxtrot. Scientists allegedly considered these to be a “major threat to the survival of the human race” (Zeca 1924).

¹⁵ Teles de Menezes (1825–1893), probably the most important figure of early Spiritism in Brazil, called himself “Catholic by birth and faith” and initially envisioned a constructive dialogue with the Catholic Church (see Machado 1983, 89).

¹⁶ The Franciscan Boaventura de Kloppenburg (1919–2009), originally an immigrant from Germany, as the bulk of the Brazilian Franciscan order by the beginning of the 20th century was, became probably the most famous Catholic opponent of Spiritism. He became the face of the last significant anti-Spiritist campaign in the Catholic press during the 1950s and authored several books about the subject (see Isaia 2005).

¹⁷ Quite paradoxically from today’s point of view, communication with the spirits of the deceased through mediums was presented as scientific and cutting edge, using modern technologies such as electricity.

In order to deal with the “Spiritist threat”, the Brazilian “good press” used traditional arguments linking their practices to summoning demons and worshipping the devil.¹⁸ In contrast with this acknowledgment that Spiritism involves some sort of real communication with the underworld (even if with demons, not with the actual spirits of the deceased), however, the Catholic press often ridiculed the Spiritists as charlatans and used scientific “proof” to discredit them. Arguments included describing Spiritism as a dangerous addiction, similar to cocaine and alcohol (*Mensagem da Fé* 1924). But certainly the most common argument was the claim that there is an inherent link between Spiritism and clinical insanity, which was also supported by the statements of esteemed Brazilian doctors (unsurprisingly usually of Catholic faith), including the head of the National Asylum for the Insane (Hospício Nacional de Psychopathia) in Rio de Janeiro, Juliano Moreira.

Statistics from his asylum allegedly showed that the “majority – in fact frightening and shameful 90% – of their patients diagnosed with insanity had Spiritism as a direct cause of their misfortune” (Soares 1926). The same author in a latter article used the 90% statistic not only for Moreira’s asylum but for all such institutions in general, adding that this “heinous sect” should “not be tolerated in our days, in our 20th century, the century of enlightenment” (Soares 1929). The direct reference to enlightenment and modernity is striking not least because this was precisely the line of attack used to criticize the Catholic Church, including by the Brazilian Spiritist press itself, which typically presented its cause as modern, enlightened, and even (pseudo)scientific (Isaia 2007).

Ultramontane Church and the Liberal Projects

Decoding Ultramontane attitudes towards the *ideological* modernity is slightly more puzzling, confused by combative rhetoric from both its liberal proponents and the Catholic intellectuals that seemingly stood in opposition. The link between the ideology of modernity and the very identity of the Republican regime was obviously noted by the Brazilian Catholic hierarchy and quickly felt in practical terms after the Church was separated from the state, first by a decree in 1890 and then definitely by the 1891 constitution. To the Brazilian

¹⁸ See, for example, a pastoral letter of the Northern Brazilian bishops from 1916, published as *Mensagem da Fé* 1916).

Catholics, both the liberal rhetoric and more radical liberal policies (including the complete secularization of public education) of the First Republic strongly resembled anticlerical regimes in Europe, especially the French Third Republic (1870–1940) and later the First Portuguese Republic (1910–1926).

As the appeals to “modernity” and “progress” became used in order to push the liberal Republican agenda and frame the legitimacy of the new regime itself, these terms soon began to be employed in an extremely negative light in the Catholic press, basically mirroring earlier discussions in Europe. The adjective “modern” (*moderno/a*) was used interchangeably with “bad” (*mau/má*) when related to literature, theatre, or cinema, meaning basically all production that was not sanctioned by the Catholic Church or produced by Catholic intellectuals. The following lines written by Zeca¹⁹ in *Mensageiro da Fé* in 1919 provide a useful summary of these views: “The modern theatre and modern cinema are adulterous, they are condemnable flirts, skilful thefts, and suicides. They are simply a long series of all the human illnesses in which on rare occasions appear a glimpse of decent sentiments” (1919).

“Modern education” then referred to secularized state education, in the words of the Catholic journalists, as “school without God” (*escola sem Deus*) (*Mensageiro da Fé* 1907a). While religious education was supposedly “the most powerful instrument of education because it is a force of discipline, a light of instruction, and an efficient basis for the physical care necessary for the development and maintenance of the human body”, “modern education” was “dangerous to the youth, who risk to becoming proud and corrupted, only satisfied with material goods” (*ibid.*).

Secular education was seen as probably the worst, most dangerous and destructive aspect of what the Catholic authors labelled “modern civilization” (*civilização moderna*) – a concept basically synonymous with the liberal political project. In contrast with the Christian civilization that preceded it and that was “based on the cross” (Norte 1916a), modern civilization was characterized by moral decay, anarchy, egoism, and materialism, which made it fundamentally pagan (*Mensageiro da Fé* 1921). Modern civilization produces “modern man”, as vividly described in *Mensageiro da Fé* in the following terms:

Modern man considers himself civilized. He presents himself in gentle and courteous manners, well fed, and well dressed. He does everything to gain money,

¹⁹ Zeca is a pen name used by the editor-in-chief of *Mensageiro da Fé*, João Manderfelt.

takes part in charity just to show off, shows no virtues, and secretly hates religion because it condemns his unconfessable appetites (ibid.).

For this reason, the author of this article concludes that it is necessary for Catholics to “catechize the civilized” and “christianize modern civilization” (ibid.).

In terms of other “modern” proposals, the Catholic Church in Brazil also remained vigilant of attempts by political and social actors to introduce the features of socialism and the women’s emancipation movement that demanded additional protections for the rising working class and equal rights for women (such as the right to vote). All these tendencies were at least rhetorically placed in the same category of dangerous “modern” inventions that needed to be countered with supposedly “traditional” recipes, offered by the Church for centuries, if not thousands of years. This unchanging nature of the Roman Catholicism was something highly praised by the “good press” – and even used as evidence of its ultimate truth, for instance compared to Protestantism, which was described on the contrary as fickle and constantly disintegrating.²⁰

A closer look at many of these “traditions”, however, demonstrate they themselves were rather modern inventions, for instance the Catholic ideal of family. This model envisioned strict division of responsibilities between men (fathers and husbands) and women (daughters and wives) whose “sacred mission” (Norte 1916b) was to get married, produce children, and take care of them – and to provide both emotional and material support to their husbands, including “preparing desirable meals, washing clothes, ironing, sewing, and repairing clothes” (*Mensagem da Fé* 1914a). As Riolando Azzi (1987) demonstrates, this model was hardly ever present in Brazil until the 19th century, when concubinate and extramarital relations between masters and their slaves ceased to be common. Even later, it only became the norm in middle-class households.

However, the Catholic positions towards these major “modern” issues were not as unchanging as they liked to claim, even in the relatively short context of the Brazilian First Republic. While the reintroduction of religious education into state schools remained perhaps the most important part of the Ultramontane Catholic Church’s political program, the Catholic Church and its press eventually accepted and even hailed a compromise when these classes became voluntary and for Catholic students only (Cechetti and Valdir 2016). The very nature of

²⁰ See, e.g., *Mensagem da Fé* 1913a.

the hated Republican regime, governed by the elected representatives of a small group of literate voters, was quickly accepted by the Catholic Church, which in Brazil (unlike in some other countries, mainly France) did not really campaign to restore the monarchy. Instead, it adapted to the rules of the political game by first attempting to form local and nationwide Catholic parties inspired by Germany or Belgium and then using its press and special electoral leagues to mobilize the eligible Catholic voters for pre-selected candidates from other mainstream conservative republican parties as the project of Catholic parties largely failed.

The Brazilian “good press” regularly and vigorously appealed to their Catholic readers to exercise the right to vote – and, of course, to use it in favour of Catholic candidates and Church-supported policies. As *Mensageiro da Fé* argued in 1914:

We cannot cease the front of public life to the enemies of religion. We must work for the sanctity of family, for religious education and the rights of the Church. And this work does not belong to the privacy of home or to conversation between individuals, it belongs to the public space, to the tribune, to the press, and to the parliament (*Mensageiro da Fé* 1914b).

Some authors even called exercising the right to vote a “sacred obligation” of “every single citizen” in order to “save the society” from anti-Christian politics (Coriolano 1914). The “modern democratic state” was occasionally criticized for all kinds of flaws, especially for systemic corruption and a lack of proper authority compared to orderly monarchies. But the Catholic Church clearly accepted the democratic republican institutions and adapted to the competitive nature of the limited (and infamously oligarchic) nature of the Brazilian Republican system.

Even in the case of women’s rights and workers’ demands, Brazilian Catholics gradually shifted their approach to include more modern interpretation of their doctrine. Although they continued to argue against women’s right to vote to the very last moment,²¹ Brazilian Catholics acknowledged rising demands for autonomy, eventually writing in favour of women’s access to education and giving voice to prominent Catholic women of the era to write their own articles in the Catholic press. These women subsequently helped to formulate what they called “Catholic feminism” – a genuinely modern sounding term!

²¹ Women were first allowed to vote in 1932, two years after the overthrow of the First Republic.

This is how influential Catholic journalist, Soares de Azevedo, described this new concept: “Let the Catholic feminism prevail among us, turning women into a mighty agent of the world progress by the enormous influence she exercises over the members of the family where she’s worshipped, valued, and respected” (Azevedo 1919b).

Catholic women were also encouraged to participate in lay mass organizations that produced their own journals, facilitated access to literature, organized events, and mobilized against more radical feminists. In Brazil, these organizations included the Women’s Alliance (Aliança Feminina), led by prominent poet Amélia Rodrigues (1861–1926), and later the Women’s League (Liga Feminina), both founded in the capital, Rio de Janeiro. While “Catholic feminism” pursued modest goals, it was still an acknowledgment by the Catholic Church of a need to provide a feasible alternative to what it otherwise perceived as the dangerous “modern” phenomenon of feminism coming from France and the United States (Azevedo 1919a). It also marked a significant shift from earlier views on women’s role in a society that saw no room for education, let alone the political activism witnessed in the 1920s (see, for instance, O Silencioso 1915).

A similar process can be observed in case of the workers’ rights, in which case the Catholic Church was obviously (and even openly) reacting to the socialist demands that had penetrated into Brazil since the very beginning of the First Republic – and gained traction in the first decades of the 20th century as industrialism belatedly caught pace. As is well known, the Catholic Church developed its own social teachings, based on Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, published in 1891. There is endless discussion over how progressive this encyclical really was;²² regardless, its interpretations in the Brazilian Catholic press became more progressive over time, just as did the rhetoric concerning workers’ rights.

Texts from the late 19th century, and the first two decades of the 20th century, concerning the workers’ question, mostly emphasized the defence of the current social order and the inherent inequality of human beings that could only be alleviated by individual acts of charity – but certainly not changed. As the editor-in-chief of *Mensagem da Fé* João Manderfelt, writing under one of his many pen names, explained in his regular column:

²² For a thorough criticism of the progressive interpretation of the encyclical (see Walsh 2012).

Poverty can never be eradicated. Why? Because its causes cannot be suppressed. The main cause of poverty are vices of the very human nature, corrupted by the sin: laziness, debauchery, drunkenness, gambling, lavishness, carelessness. Both physical and mental suffering are the result of sin and well-deserved punishment for it. It is impossible to eradicate poverty, just as it is impossible to eradicate sin (Bahiano 1919).

The Catholic press also regularly described the moral and spiritual benefits of individual poverty compared to the horrible burden certainly felt by those who were rich because “wealth produces pleasure, addiction, and premature death” (Norte 1915). As the aforementioned editor-in-chief of *Mensageiro da Fé* wrote in 1915:

Be reasonable! The rich man doesn't wear your ragged clothes, nor does he suffer from your hunger, he doesn't shed your tears, nor does he share the same anxieties. But he sheds other tears, comes through other hardships, and [...] suffers in ways that you will never have to suffer. [...] Oh how beautiful is [...] the life of an uncomplaining poor man who gains a piece of bread with the sweat of his body, he brings this bread to his little cottage, enters, and hugs and kisses and laughs and shares and lives (ibid.).

These attitudes towards poverty and wealth/luxury can be understood as a continuation of the Catholic moral-based criticism of materialism and idealization of the simple, poor life to be found in the original Gospels and reproduced by the reformers of the Church, such as St. Francis (after all, *Mensageiro da Fé* was administered by the Franciscans). But at the same time, they could be interpreted as embracing the modern capitalist economic model created and staunchly defended by the Brazilian liberals. In practice, the ideal of the “class harmony” promoted by the Catholics continued the exact same relationship between the factory owners and workers, only slightly alleviated by religion-based measures (e.g., Sunday rest laws). The Brazilian Catholic press in the First Republic remained, for instance, vigorously opposed to the idea of the labour unions.

As social tensions progressed after World War I, however, including revolutionary movements inspired by the 1917 Russian Revolution,²³ even the

²³ Most importantly, the so-called “Anarchist Insurrection” in Rio de Janeiro in 1918.

Catholic journalists began to change their focus – directly targeting readers among the workers and stressing the need to improve their living conditions. One of the most prominent Brazilian Catholic journalists, Soares de Azevedo, went as far as to call for “Catholic revolution” in 1929 – in order to stop the otherwise inevitable “global revolution”.

The workers, the farmers, the lower classes live overburdened by the State’s taxes and overburdened by the demands of their employers. The dissatisfaction is widespread. [...] The [threat of] revolution comes from the workers, those miserable victims, this unfortunate anonymous mass, for which there was not a single gesture of care and love. The sweat and blood they shed makes riches for others in such a clear imbalance between rights and duties and even against the most respectable principles of justice and charity. [...] Let’s therefore make our own revolution, a revolution of good order, justice, and charity, before the enemies of these principles turn the entire world into a slavish copy of Russia (Azevedo 1929).

I find the Catholic use of revolutionary rhetoric particularly striking, as the Catholic press traditionally described any sort of “revolution” in the worst possible light – and indeed as the beginning of everything that was negative and dangerous about the modern era. The Catholic Church, however, soon found itself fully embracing certain kind of revolution in the 1930s: the revolution that overthrew the First Republic and eventually led to the instalment of the strongly authoritarian regime of Getúlio Vargas (president from 1930 to 1945 and again from 1951 to 1954), which built its legitimacy on pushing forward both economic modernization (such as financing large-scale development projects and modernizing infrastructure and industry) and the dramatic improvement of workers’ conditions.

Final Remarks

Examples in this article aim to demonstrate that the relationship between Ultramontane Catholicism and different forms of modernity were far more complex than usually portrayed. Brazil during the period of the “Old Republic” served as a sort of case study of this complex and often misrepresented relationship – and while it was in many ways specific (for instance, in the very tense relationship between the “old regime” of the empire and the Catholic Church), as I tried to demonstrate, it was certainly not significantly different than in

other countries. After all, a large part of the Church's agenda was set up by the centralized papacy and only adapted to unique national circumstances.

Rather than accepting the propaganda of both the Ultramontane Catholic Church and its political and ideological opponents that put the 19th and early 20th century Catholicism in direct opposition to modernity, I propose to see this relationship as an evolving form of negotiation and adaptation. Ultramontanism itself was a response to the changing society and culture that adopted numerous features and tools of the forming modern nation-states and modernizing societies and continued to adapt to the challenges of different facets of modernization, including the adaptation of the liberal rhetoric and partially even political programs of the liberal modernity.

It was precisely this continuous negotiation and adaptation that allowed the Catholic Church to at least globally survive the demands for further secularization – and in the case of Brazil, come out of the difficult period of the First Republic, founded on liberal and anti-Catholic principles, with an even greater influence in politics and society. The statue of Christ the Redeemer (Cristo Redentor) inaugurated in 1931 on the hill of Corcovado above Rio de Janeiro can be seen as a perfect symbol of this position – and of the Catholic adaptation to modernity – as it represents a technologically superb structure, dedicated to a recent, early-20th-century devotion of the Sacred Heart. Designed in the style of art deco, its contemporaries called it tellingly “the miracle of faith, the prodigy of technology”, a “real monument to faith, engineering, and the arts”, or the “monument of science, art, and religion” (Giumbelli 2008, 87).

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