

Editorial

Dossier - Pentecostalism, politics, and human rights

Religion and Human Rights, between progress and retreats

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The relationship between religion and human rights in Brazil is a long-term one. Despite more recently the presence of religion in the public debate on this topic could be described as a kind of counterweight to progressive proposals to expand rights, this has not always been the case. This happens because, fundamentally, the field of human rights itself has changed significantly in the last four decades. The emphasis on human rights, its main actors, political agents, and themes have changed, and, with it, the position of some religious groups has also shifted.

As already shown in other texts (STEIL; TONIOL, 2012; 2013), the emergency of the struggle for human rights and its consolidation in Brazil were directly related to the actions of the Catholic Church. Originally linked to the cause through the fight for civil and political rights of those who were persecuted during the Brazilian military dictatorship, the Church marked its presence not only in the internal defense of these citizens but also acted internationally, taking some cases to international courts. The institution's position changed in the 1990s, especially with the entry of new actors into the

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political arena of the human rights struggle, who began to demand the inclusion of sexual and reproductive rights under this approach.

Briefly, we can affirm that by tracing the historical trajectory of the Catholic Church's positions concerning human rights in Brazil we recognize that the institution has gradually moved from the political field, in which the subjects of rights were political prisoners and the poor, to the field of sexuality and *natural law*, in which the *embryos' rights*, translated in terms of the *right to life*, and the defense of the heterosexual family. This displacement accompanies the process of democratization of Brazilian society and the expansion of the incorporated claims under the denomination of human rights, especially those raised by the new social movements that bring into the political arena the issues of gender, ethnic diversity, and environmental risks.

The appearance and empowerment of these movements in the political scene shapes a new correlation of forces among groups involved with human rights. The inclusion of gender issues in the agenda of the human rights movement in Brazil, especially those that affect the field of sexual morality – the decriminalization of abortion and the civil union of couples of the same sex - has resulted in a disagreement with the Catholic Church. Thus, if during the military dictatorship the Catholic Church was identified with the progressive social forces by denouncing the torture of political prisoners and the structural causes of poverty; in the democratic context, its position becomes identified, above all, with the conservative forces, to the extent that its political action focuses on the struggle against the incorporation of sexual and reproductive rights into the broader discourse of human rights.

In the 2010 general elections, especially during the second round, which involved Dilma Rousseff and José Serra, the change of the church's position in the face of the new set of issues that the human rights agenda had come to imply, and at the same time the constant reference to its historical role in the struggle for these human rights became. What was at issue was the release of the Third National Human Rights Program (PNDH-3), developed still in 2009 and to be launched by whoever assumed the presidency.

In a written statement issued by CNBB (National Conference of Bishops of Brazil), in May 2010, the Catholic Church took a position on the PNDH-3, regarding the controversial topics, as transcribed below:

We reaffirm our position, so many times expressed, in defense of life and family, the woman's dignity, the parents' right to religious and ethical education of their children, the respect to religious symbols, and against the practice and decriminalization of abortion, the "marriage" between people of the same sex, the adoption of children by homosexual couples and the prostitution professionalization.¹

Throughout the election period, the national CNBB has continued to issue statements orienting the Catholic Faithful to vote for candidates who are in favor of life from the moment of conception. While the Catholic Church led the fight for the defense and promotion of human rights as long as these rights were more related to the defense of the poor and the denunciation of torture and political persecution, after the incorporation of sexual and reproductive rights in this discourse, the Church went backward and lost its leading role to NGOs. In the context of the elections, even when it tried to connect with the meanings of human rights associated with issues related to social and political rights, which conferred visibility and moral prestige to the Catholic Church, the constraint imposed by the ecclesial context did not allow its more progressive sectors to openly associate with the other social movement organizations in the defense of the human rights formulated in the PNDH-3 that, beyond the polemic themes rejected by Catholic morality, has proposed important social advances. The abortion issue stands out in any statement or argumentation that the Catholic Church presents in defense of human rights. In this sense, the excerpt from a document released by the CNBB during the electoral campaign can be helpful to understand this semantic dispute over the meaning of human rights that the current ecclesial conjuncture imposes:

In the face of so many reductionisms that consider only some aspects or dimensions of the human being, it is the Church's mission to proclaim integral anthropology, a vision of the human person created in the image and resemblance of God and called, in Christ, to a communion of eternal life with his Creator. The human person is thus sacred from the moment of conception to his or her natural end. The Church, which is unequivocally committed to the defense of the dignity and human rights, supports initiatives that seek to ensure

¹ Statement issued on 05/15/2010 during the 48th General Assembly of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops.

these rights for all. However, it denounces unacceptable distortions present in some items of the PNDH-3. (DECLARAÇÃO, 2010).

This concern with connecting to a previous experience in defense of human rights that can be observed in the CNBB when it speaks at the national level seems to be absent in most regional statements. In some regions of the CNBB, the electoral campaign created conditions for a confrontation of the bishops and local clergy with the candidate of the PT. In São Paulo, for example, the Federal Police collected two million pamphlets, out of the twenty million that had already been distributed, signed by the bishops of the First South Region of the CNBB, which includes this state, which established the following relationship: "Herod has ordered the killing of dozens of newborn babies (Mt 2:17). With this decree [referring to PNDH-3] Lula will allow the massacre of hundreds of thousands or even millions of children in their mothers' breasts" (D'AGOSTINO, 2010). The First Eastern Regional, which includes the state of Rio de Janeiro, for its part, issued a note denouncing the PNDH-3 as an act of authoritarianism that turns human rights into an ideological and partisan project. (DOM FILIPO, n.d.).

The Archdiocese of Rio de Janeiro, for example, classified the PNDH-3 as "a radical socialist-style booklet [...] a clear act of authoritarianism that frames human rights in an ideological, intolerant project that has taken the country back to the dictatorship times. (SANTORO, 2010). In this same sense, Dom Felippo Santoro, from the Diocese of Petrópolis, stated that the PNDH-3 had not been submitted to a national debate, disrespecting the autonomy of the National Congress, attacking the Federal Constitution and the legislation in effect. (SANTORO, 2010).

In the same vein of denunciation, Cardinal Geraldo Majela declared that

the Third National Human rights Program intends to pass off as a universal right the will of a minority since the majority of the Brazilian population has explicitly manifested its contrary will. To approve by a decree that has already been rejected repeatedly by legitimate bodies brings to the surface authoritarian methods, from which we liberated ourselves with much sacrifice when democracy was re-established in Brazil in the 1980s. (MANIFESTO, 2010).

Two facts must be considered here. The first is the reaffirmation that the human rights grammar has, in fact, substantially changed in recent decades, repositioning religious actors historically engaged in the cause. The second is that this situation has created the conditions for the rise of a strong articulation between Catholics and Evangelicals, not only at the level of civil or religious groups but also at the political alliance level in the parliament, which has been able to promote their political forces in the party-political field.

A significant event in this second fact was the election, in March 2013, of the new president of one of the Permanent Commissions of the House of Representatives, the Commission on Human Rights and Minorities (CDHM). On that occasion, the pastor and congressman Marco Feliciano was elected to the presidency of the committee, provoking several polemic reactions from activists of social movements, politicians and religious leaders. This election, arranged by the political forces represented in the House of Representatives, interrupted a long tradition of giving the presidency of this Commission to left-wing politics, identified with the defense and reparation of the rights of political prisoners, of the prison population in general, and youths and adolescents in correctional facilities. The choice of Marco Feliciano was thus immediately perceived as the defeat of a conception of human rights, forged in the struggle of social movements' struggles and political groups historically engaged in the process of democratization of the country. At the same time, it represented a setback in the institutional recognition of the rights of ethnic and sexual minorities and vulnerable populations who had found in this Commission an important channel for dialogue with the State and an instance for the legal compliance of their demands and the social legitimization of their positions.

Affiliated to the Social Christian Party (PSC), Marco Feliciano was elected a congressman for the São Paulo state in the 2010 elections with 212,000 votes. During his term as Congressman, with strong support from the evangelical caucus, he established himself as a party leader in the House of Representatives, defending causes related to sexual morality and family defense, points of convergence of politicians identified as religious in the National Congress. Thus, already in 2011, the deputy pastor proposed the holding of a national plebiscite

on the legal recognition of the homo-affective union as a family entity. Confident that the popular plebiscite would reject legal recognition of the homo-affective union, the religious congressmen insisted on this political resource as a way to remove the decision on this controversial issue from the scope of Congress and the Supreme Court. (FELICIANO, 2011). Even because the Supreme Court, anticipating a position of Congress, had ruled in favor of the legal recognition of same-sex unions.

Thus, in a statement in the House of Representatives, Feliciano claims that the Supreme Court's decision in favor of the legal union of people of the same sex,

had caused perplexity and consternation in Brazilian society, so that the popular participation, through the plebiscite will enable a great involvement of the whole society with the family issue, capable of providing sufficient and relevant information, as well as the will and understanding of the population on this issue. (FELICIANO, 2011).

The reaction of sexual rights movements to Feliciano's statement was immediate. To this statement in the House of Representatives, it was added the publication of homophobic and racist comments by Feliciano in social networks, associating homosexuality to violence and hatred, and the condition of the black population to damnation of religious character. The pastor states: "The rottenness of the feelings of homo-affective people leads to hatred, crime, rejection" and "The curse that Noah casts on his grandson, Canaan, splashes over the African continent, hence the famine, plagues, diseases, ethnic wars!" (LEMOS, 2011). As we can see, we are far from the position of the previous presidents of the CDHM, whose central concern was the inclusion of demands for social recognition and respect for the diversity of ethnic and sexual minorities in the field of human rights.

Pastor Feliciano was not alone in this turn of events at the CDHM. His choice for the presidency was a result of a movement that had been conducted by the PSC as part of the alliances of the Workers' Party (PT) to form its support base for the election of Dilma Rousseff to the presidency of the republic in 2010. Thus, in this electoral context, the presidency of the CDHM was negotiated by the parties of the allied base to the government and offered to the PSC and was

decided in an election that took place within the Commission, in which the PSC received 11 votes in favor of the pastor and one blank². Immediately the fact hit the headlines of the printed and electronic media:

Marco Feliciano is elected president of the Human rights Commission. (NÉRI, 2013). Controversial pastor will preside the Human Rights Commission of the House of Representatives. (PASTOR, 2013). Congress members appeal to the plenary against Feliciano. (COELHO, 2013). Congress member criticizes Feliciano and protester climbs table. (DEPUTADO, 2013). Congressman Pastor Marco Feliciano is target of "Judas casting" in Brasilia. (DEPUTADO PASTOR, 2013). Protests against Marco Feliciano reach Berlin. (NEHER, 2013). Protester is detained, and Feliciano moves meeting to another plenary. (COSTA; PASSARINHO, 2013).

The demonstrations of rejection to Feliciano's election were responded by pastors and politicians who share his ideas and positions. During the General Convention of the Assemblies of God in Brazil, held in Brasilia in April 2013, a motion of support for Feliciano was unanimously approved by the representatives of the main Pentecostal church in the country. Feliciano capitalized on this support in his favor and went to the media to thank the pastors. Using religious language to state his political position, he says that "there has never been a commission with so much prayer. The pastors are praying for my life and the commission. We will win this battle". (CONVENÇÃO, 2013).

Marco Feliciano was elected in 2013 to hold the presidency of the CDHM. A little over five years later, with Jair Bolsonaro as president of the republic, a new turn in this story was taken. Pastor Damares Alves was taken to the position of Minister of Women, Family, and human rights. This is certainly one of the most emblematic events in this trajectory of relations between religion, politics, and human rights in Brazil. With Damares at the head of the ministry, the institutional agenda of human rights in the country was radically transformed into a struggle for contention in sexual, reproductive, and minority rights.

² On the day of the election for the presidency of the CDHM, Domingos Dutra, of the PT, acting president of the body, resigned from his position against the prohibition of the entrance of representatives of social movements in the session. From the 18 members of the Commission, only twelve remained in the session.

I could not finish this editorial, however, without underlining that there is a risk in dealing with religions from their institutional, ecclesiastical, and more politically visible actors, disregarding what Christian progressive groups and churches have been doing in Brazil. This is because the reaction of these groups is not small and more recently we have seen the rise of important ecumenical alliances in the defense of the rights of the LGBTQI+ population, for example.

Human rights are an open field, a contested field. For researchers interested in the religious field, they constitute a real research agenda, whose investment in the coming years will never be enough. It is necessary to pay attention to the most visible events of this contest, but also to those that receive less media attention, but which, generated inside the churches, bring us the hope of a more democratic horizon.

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