

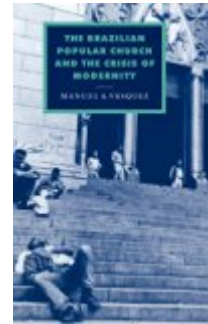
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Manuel A. Vasquez. *The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xv + 302 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-58508-8.

Reviewed by Iain S. Maclean (Department of Philosophy and Religion, James Madison University)

Published on H-LatAm (September, 1998)



Brazilian Church and Modernity in Crisis

This is a significant contribution to the study of the Brazilian Roman Catholic Church which not only provides a rich analysis, but also an illustrative example of an approach which seeks to relate the case study method (or microanalysis) to wider theoretical issues (or macroanalysis). Specifically, this is an examination of the ongoing crisis which the Brazilian “popular Church” has been undergoing over at least the last decade. The “popular” or “progressive” Church in Brazil represents that combination of liberation theologians and clerics within the Roman Catholic Church whose opposition to the military regime during the Seventies made the Brazilian Church one of the most socially conscious and politically active in Latin America. Through this period, in the absence of a free civil and political society, it literally became the “voice of the voiceless.”

However, with the *Abertura* or gradual democratization of the Brazilian political arena, this popular Church seemed to lose visibility, impact, and influence, not only within the institutional Church, but also amongst those whom it sought to help, the poor and oppressed. Ultimately, claims Vasquez, the crisis of the popular church, is connected to the loss of plausibility, amongst the very poor, of the modernist emancipatory project. He thus offers an interpretation which, while building on earlier research, offers a new and provocative interpretation of the contemporary ecclesial situation. Earlier studies of the Brazilian Roman Catholic Church, such as those by Thomas Bruneau (*The Church in Brazil: The Politics of Religion, 1982*) and Scott Mainwaring (*The Catholic Church*

and Politics in Brazil 1916-1985, 1986), provided broad and comprehensive analyses of the role of the Church (and of liberation theology in particular) in the political arena. While Bruneau tended to emphasize the study of the Church as an institution, Mainwaring, recognising the strengths of such an approach, stressed the role played by theological concepts such as ecclesiology and the institution’s (or elements of it) self-conception of mission for understanding its political stance. Since the publication of these two works in English, the Brazilian scholar Riolandi Azzi has continued publishing his multi-volume *Historia da Igreja no Brasil*, but this is a theological work rather than a social scientific study. In the years following the works by Bruneau and Mainwaring, the scholarly literature on the subject of the Church and politics in Brazil, both in Brazil and the English-speaking world, has been dominated by micro-analytic studies with specific foci. Thus, sociologists, social anthropologists, and theologians such as H. E. Hewitt, John Burdick, Paulo Freston, Paulo Krischke, Cecilia Mariz, Madeleine Adrience, William Ireland, Jose Comblin, and Rogerio Valle have all made valuable contributions to the field by publishing detailed case studies of interactions between Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions as well studies of base communities, dioceses, popular religion, the role of women, the role of elites, rural versus urban base communities, and, in Ralph della Cava’s case, examinations of the impact of Vatican policies on the Brazilian Church. So great has the volume of these studies become that it seemed that none dared to move from the micro- to the macroanalysis.

This is where Vasquez has made a significant contribution, by ably synthesizing an immense and diverse body of information on the Catholic Church and by offering a quite compelling thesis to explain not just a crisis, but indeed the apparent demise of the “popular church.” First of all, what is the “crisis of modernity” that Vasquez claims has afflicted the Brazilian Popular Church? First, he notes what has become obvious over the last decade: that the ecclesial base communities and the liberation theologians associated with these communities have experienced a dramatic decline in membership, in participation in popular mobilization efforts, and in visibility. This has been variously attributed, according to some of the authors noted above, to rising ecclesiastical conservatism, to the rise of competing alternative religions (most particularly Pentecostalism), and to a shift in the political context (democratization, fall of really existent Socialisms, etc).

What Vasquez suggests, and convincingly argues, is that the Catholic ecclesial base communities (abbreviated as CEB’s) and the “popular” or “progressive” Church actually represent a modernist project of emphasizing self consciousness, self-determination, and its concomitant vision or utopia of the creation of both a new humanity and society. However, states Vasquez, this was based on the rationalist, modernist assumption that humans had the freedom to change their situations, and importantly, that societal structures would permit such to occur. This he terms the “modernist utopian project,” which Vasquez’s study reveals needs to be rethought (p. 15). For given the Brazilian (and wider Latin American) context, some aporias are present in modernity’s utopia, such as the belief in progress, an optimism in the human ability to shape and create the future, and in the assumption that modernity could only assume one form, namely a “single telos and an inner logic readily available to rational apprehension” (p. 24). Thus, according to this utopian vision, human emancipation became synonymous with technological and scientific mastery of reality—in other words, the positing of a rational utopia. Liberation theology, which expresses a socialist version of modernity’s rationalist project, thus highlights the ways in which the popular church’s worldview appropriates and resonates with some of the key themes of modernity’s emancipatory project, “especially in its Hegelian-Marxist version” (p. 45). So, the popular church has a “totalizing reading of history” derived from a modernist reading of Christian eschatology“ which unfortunately has blinded it to the precariousness of this emancipatory project at the actual grassroots of Brazilian society which lack the structures

to warrant or grant credibility to modernity’s utopia.

What, according to Vasquez’s reading, precipitated the crisis of the Brazilian popular church’s utopian project was the shift in the economy (the globalization of capital) in the early 1980s, one which devastatingly moved the majority of Brazilians into deeper poverty. The survival strategies required in this changed economic context were other than those assumed by the “popular church’s” modernist vision. The now increasingly impoverished masses existed on short-term, pragmatic and paternalistic survival strategies which were at odds with the modernistic, structuralist, and long-term societal renewal strategies advocated by the popular Church (p. 4). The effects of changes in economy and world capitalism severely limited the ability of the poor to act rationally and effectively as a class. This effectively limited the appeal of the “popular Church” among the classes so affected and who needed and sought more immediate relief in their situation. While earlier researchers such as Mariz, Burdick, and Ireland had noted the differing and favorable responses by these underclasses to religions other than liberation theology’s version of Catholicism, they did not ask why this was happening at this specific time. Vasquez both asks this question, answers it, and places it within a wider theoretical framework.

This is dealt within the book’s four carefully crafted parts, dealing in turn with outlining the background to the crisis of the Brazilian popular Church, exploring the nature of the crisis, explaining the crisis, and reinterpreting the crisis. The theoretical side of this thesis is based in part on an empirical study of a CEB community in Nova Iguaçu, a working class suburb outside of Rio de Janeiro. The broader theoretical framework is provided through the creative utilization of both the world systems approach of Wallerstein and the work of Anthony Giddens and Ann Swidler. This enables Vasquez to link his micro-analysis of a single base community with larger theoretical paradigms. This, in turn, enables him to show how both processes are constitutive of each other and how cultural elements predetermine social actors choices. This leads in turn to the claim that analyses such as David Martin’s and Cecilia Mariz’s are overly functionalist, to be balanced by a “thicker Geertzian reading” which recognises the role of ideas and theology in reproducing both CEB’s and Pentecostals (p. 87).

This work offers a concise definition of the modernist utopian project, a clear and brisk survey of the “popular church’s” ideological (“ideological” understood more positively as “Weltanschauung”) and theological bases in

the socialist version of the Western modernist utopia, all skillfully set in the context of the institutional Church and the related internal and external ecclesiastical pressures on the national and international levels. This includes an examination of the perceived external crisis, namely the dramatic rise of Pentecostalism, which does not facilitate organised political action, but does empower the individual poor in the family sphere and in local politics. Significantly, Vasquez notes that Pentecostalism's most rapid growth has occurred precisely at a time when traditional political actors are in decline and, due to worsening economic conditions, the poor are experiencing an increasing loss of control over their lives (Chapters 3-5). The results of this examination are then used as a case study to illumine the crisis of the Brazilian "popular church" as one which is linked to the broader crisis of modernity indicated by post-modernism (Chapter 8).

Vasquez concludes his study by exploring some of the implications of his research for the future of the "popular Church." The skillful analysis of the structural features of the present crisis clearly indicate the modernist assumptions of much of the "popular church's" theology and practice and the creation of some form of "via media" between the increasing polarization between "basist" and "vanguardist" positions. A possible alternative, he suggests, could be derived from the more holistic CEB model of the North Eastern regions of Brazil, one which seeks to integrate spirituality and localized social activity.

This careful and provocative work is a worthy ad-

dition to the Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion. It fills a lacuna in scholarly work on the Brazilian church by tracing the recent fortunes of the "popular church," as well as attempting to overcome the division between microanalytic case studies and macroanalytical overviews of national and international trends. Two suggestions perhaps remain. First, that further research into the differences between CEBs in the North and the South (their relative strengths, differences, emphases, etc.) could serve as a significant case study for this thesis. Second, if shifts in global capitalism are responsible for the crisis of the Brazilian popular Church, how has this shift been refracted in the differing regions of Brazil? Vasquez recognises this issue without exploring it further. This raises the interesting question of the relationship between specific ideas and the constraints (economic, social and political) of local economic and religious contexts. This work provides an admirable example of such a context which calls for further comparative confirmation. Finally, the results of Vasquez's study suggest further avenues of research into the realm of civil society. For if his thesis is correct, then is the economic downturn affecting all voluntary associations across the board, and how would CEB's and Pentecostal churches function or relate here: are they alternatives to or part of an emerging (or disappearing?) civil society?

Copyright (c)1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved This work may be copied for non-profit, educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net at H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Iain S. Maclean. Review of Vasquez, Manuel A., *The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2306>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.