

CHURCH, STATE AND EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE MOVIMENTO DE EDUCAÇÃO DE BASE (MEB)

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UMA ANÁLISE DA CONSTITUIÇÃO DO MOVIMENTO DE EDUCAÇÃO DE BASE (MEB)

IGLESIA, ESTADO Y EDUCACIÓN:
UN ANÁLISIS DE LA CONSTITUCIÓN DEL MOVIMENTO DE EDUCAÇÃO DE BASE (MEB)

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the process of constitution of the Movimento de Educação de Base – MEB –, reflecting about the dynamics of relations between Church and State in Brazil, at a time when education in the rural environment was disputed by diverse social groups. The objective was to understand how, within an officially secular state, an agreement could be signed and justified in which the Brazilian Government financed a movement proposed and coordinated by the Catholic Church. Theoretically based on the notions of elite groups and influence, it investigated the approximations between governmental and religious agents involved in establishing the agreement. Finally, it analyzed the decree formalizing the agreement, relating some of its main points with the previous process.

Keywords: history of brazilian education, education policy, religion and education.

Resumo: O artigo analisa o processo de constituição do Movimento de Educação de Base – MEB –, refletindo sobre a dinâmica das relações entre Igreja e Estado no Brasil, em um momento em que a educação no meio rural era disputada por diversos grupos sociais. Tem por objetivo compreender como, no interior de um Estado oficialmente laico, pôde ser firmado e justificado um convênio no qual o governo federal brasileiro financiou um movimento proposto e coordenado pela Igreja Católica. Embasando-se teoricamente nas noções de grupos de elite e influência, investiga as aproximações entre os agentes governamentais e religiosos envolvidos na consecução do acordo. Finalmente, analisa o decreto de formalização do convênio, relacionando alguns de seus pontos principais com o processo antecedente.

Palavras-chave: história da educação brasileira, política da educação, religião e educação.

Resumen: El artículo analiza el proceso de constitución del Movimento de Educação de Base - MEB -, reflexionando sobre la dinámica de las relaciones entre Iglesia y Estado en Brasil, en un momento en que la educación en el medio rural era disputada por diversos grupos sociales. Tiene por objetivo comprender cómo, en un Estado oficialmente laico, pudo ser firmado y justificado un convenio en el cual el gobierno financió un movimiento propuesto y coordinado por la Iglesia Católica. Fundamentado teóricamente por las nociones de grupos de élite e influencia, investiga los acercamientos entre los agentes gubernamentales y religiosos involucrados en la consecución del acuerdo. Finalmente, analiza el decreto del convenio, relacionando sus puntos principales con el proceso antecedente.

Palabras clave: historia de la educación brasileña, política educativa, religión y educación.

INTRODUCTION

The Movimento de Educação de Base (MEB) was created by the Catholic Church, in the beginning of 1961, with the objective of developing an educational program, through radio schools, with the populations of rural areas considered to be underdeveloped in the north, northeast and center-west of the country. This movement, although originated from the ecclesiastical initiative and coordinated by members of the clergy, was financed by the federal government. The proposal for collaboration was made by Dom José Vicente Távora¹, then Archbishop of Aracaju, on behalf of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB), to the newly elected President Jânio Quadros. The agreement was materialized by Presidential Decree 50370, signed in March 1961. Some numbers allow to glimpse the scope of the project: MEB even had 7,353 radio schools in 14 states in early 1964, classes were then transmitted by a network of 29 broadcasters and, in the first five years of operation, around 320 thousand students completed the literacy cycle (Fávero, 2006).

Much of what is known about the process of implantation and functioning of the MEB is due to two books: *Uma pedagogia da participação popular: análise da prática educativa do MEB – Movimento de Educação de Base (1961/1966)*, by Osmar Fávero (2006), and, *Católicos radicais no Brasil*, by Emanuel de Kadt (2007)². In addition to these two classic works, the movement has been studied at least since the 1980s, with different approaches³. This article intends to participate in the reflections on the MEB from an aspect still poorly addressed: the analysis of the socio-political intricacies that made its constitution feasible, in a context in which the educational initiatives developed in Brazil, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, are inserted in a broader process, guided by developmental ideas.

The creation of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], in 1948, was fundamental for the dissemination and

¹ Biographical data of the bishops can be found in Beozzo (2001). Specifically on Távora, see Nascimento (2008) and Santana (2011). This study was limited to information that contributes to the analysis.

² Osmar Fávero belonged to the MEB National Secretariat from its creation until May 1966. The work cited was presented as a doctoral thesis at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, in 1984, and that of Kadt, elaborated as a doctoral thesis at the University of London and originally published in English by Oxford University Press in 1970.

³ The following can be mentioned, for example: analysis of the impact of MEB at the local level, Raposo (1982); relations between education and unionism, Paiva (1992); use of the radio and the interactions between education and popular culture, Souza (2006) and Alves (2020); interactions between study, evangelization and political practice, Chaves (2008); theoretical bases of the movement, Rodrigues (2008); socio-educational practices in their articulation with politics, Wanderley (1984); argumentative strategies present in teaching materials, Rodrigues (2009); persistence of the MEB in the 1980s-90s and its socio-educational action, Rocha (2011); approximations and distances between MEB and the Popular Culture Center/CPC, Gonzalez (2011); political role of intellectual monitors, Adriano (2012); and ways of internalizing the movement, Santos (2014).

consolidation of this conception that, from an economic point of view, proposed the industrialization and the overcoming of the agricultural export model for the entire region. In the Brazilian case, the influence of ECLAC can be seen in the formulations of the Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies [ISEB], created in 1955, and in the elaboration of the *Esboço de um programa de desenvolvimento para a economia brasileira no período de 1955 a 1960*, by the economist Celso Furtado, who served as the basis for the *Plano de metas* of the Juscelino Kubitschek government.

The developmentalist discourse also addressed the rural environment to denounce the 'backwardness' and its abandonment, defending the need for a productive restructuring. This restructuring would require, among other measures, the expansion of the performance of the National State based on policies such as agrarian reform, the extension of labor legislation and the expansion of basic education to rural workers⁴.

This modernizing environment met the renewing climate that also affected the ecclesiastical hierarchy, especially due to its more progressive portion, resulting in interinstitutional cooperation actions. A notable example would be the creation of the Northeast Development Superintendency [SUDENE], in 1959, for which Roberto Romano offers a theoretical and contextual interpretation:

The theory of unequal industrialization, combined with the archaism of rural structures, provides the frame of reference for projecting a historical synthesis of the ecclesiastical struggle for SUDENE as a modernizing instrument for the region and neutralizing the country's socio-economic differences (Romano, 1979, p. 29).

Also according to Romano (1979, p. 155), the prestige of sociology and economics was strengthened in the actions of bishops during the Juscelino Kubitschek period, conferring "[...] the meaning of the true symbiosis operated between the bishops and the technicians who helped the federal government to found SUDENE".

In the perspective, therefore, of a common ideal, which guided the various initiatives, this analysis of the historical situation is performed, which aims to understand how, within an officially secular State, an agreement could be signed and justified in which the Brazilian federal government financed a movement proposed and coordinated by the Catholic Church. The questions that guided this discussion were the following: how were the specificities of the Catholic Church as an institution reflected in its objectives of combating illiteracy? How did the

⁴ The work of Ioris's work (2017) presents a synthesis of discussions on the theme of developmentalism. For an analysis of the construction of the developmental discourse and on the relations between education and development, see, among others, Moraes (1995, 2005), Prado (2008) and Klaus (2011).

approximations between the main government and religious agents involved in establishing the MEB take place? How was it possible to justify the institutionalization of this agreement?

The analysis was theoretically based on the notions of elite and influence groups, based on the reflections of Bruneau (1974). The use of these analytical categories was directed, in particular, to the examination of institutional links and among agents representing the institutions. In the case of the Church, it refers to the CNBB and some members of the episcopate, more active in the movement's officialization process.

This is an excerpt that highlights the aspects related to competence and transit with the public spheres of members of an ecclesiastical elite, aiming to assist in the understanding of the set of factors that justified the support of the federal government for the implantation of the MEB. Other approaches provide different views, which can be, in part, divergent or complementary, such as those of Wanderley (1984), Kadt (2007) or Fávero (2006), composing a panorama of a very broad historical perspective.

The study started from two methodological procedures. Initially, in the light of bibliographic and documentary contributions, it was reflected on the performance of the Brazilian ecclesiastical elite, highlighting the relations between the Catholic Church and the federal Executive Power that enabled the MEB launch agreement.

The following procedure was the documentary analysis of Decree 50.370 (1961). To this end, André Cellard's suggestions were followed, who warns to observe five interrelated dimensions of the investigative process. They are an examination of the global social context in which the document was produced; the knowledge about their producers, individual and/or collective, seeking to know their biographical data, motivations, social positions and networks of relationships; establishing the type and origin of the document, as well as the possible motivations for its constitution. To these contextual dimensions are added two, of an analytical character: the observation of the internal logic and the key concepts of the text and the identification of the meanings and historicity of the terms used by the authors and, finally, the interpretative analysis, which consists of collection, classification and comparison of preliminary information and interpretation of texts based on the guiding questions and analytical categories (Cellard, 2008).

Based on this theoretical-methodological perspective, and in order to answer the proposed questions, the text was organized into three topics. The first examines the Brazilian ecclesiastical context, especially the ways in which the CNBB acts in the Church's socio-political disputes and its efforts to maintain influence in the rural environment. Still in this topic, the main Catholic agents involved in the proposal to implant the MEB are identified. The second topic deals with the

relations between members of the episcopate and the politicians who made the establishment of the agreement possible. In the third, the text of the decree 50.370 is analyzed.

PECULIARITIES OF THE ECCLESIASTIC MODERNIZATION PROCESS AND ITS (RE)INSERTION IN BRAZILIAN POLICY

During the period under review, modernization became the watchword for different sectors of society, and this included, in an unavoidable way, the Catholic Church. Dermi Azevedo (2004, p. 111-112) notes that, throughout the 20th century, among the various transformations brought about by the separation of the State and Church in Brazil, was the fact that the Catholic institution

[...] chooses to act, with all possible visibility, in the political arena. This option implies collaboration with the State, in terms of partnership and guarantee of the status quo. [...] The 1934 Constitution records some results of this attack, such as the institution of religious education in public schools, the presence of military chaplains in the Armed Forces and the state subsidy for assistance activities linked to the Church. The process of changing paradigms in the Church has gained strength since the 1960s, under the influence of the Second Vatican Council. In the 1950s to 1960s, the Church in Brazil prioritizes the issue of development.

However, the Church ‘prioritizes’ the problem of development according to specific interests, that is, distinct from the socioeconomic objectives of the State, for example. In order to avoid the risk of obliterating the complexity of the relations between these institutions, it should be noted, according to Romano, that the Church’s project is the ‘popular salvation’. In this direction, even the

[...] autonomous national development is understood as ‘means’ in view of the realization of this ‘end’. In the rejection of the new economic model, linked to imperialism, two particular types of reason operate: the first, of a moral and theological order, finds that the majority of the people live in poverty and suffer social injustices; the second, of a scientific nature, would state the objective factors of this situation. Based on these elements, they affirm [the Brazilian bishops] the need to transform contemporary society, which in turn would be an ‘effective’ ‘sign of the liberation of the oppressed’ (Romano, 1979, p. 34-35, emphasis added).

It seems relevant to observe such emphases, especially in view of studies that directly align the action and thinking of ‘progressive’ Catholics with left-wing

sectors of civil society. Although it cannot be disregarded that this approach occurred - leading Catholic groups to engage in armed struggle, after the 1964 coup -, the objectives are considered, although they have some similarity, in the sense of constituting, both, finalist utopias, were of a different nature. Furthermore, following Romano, it must be remembered that there is no way to outline the ecclesiastical discourse in a simplistic way with political attitudes towards conservatism or progressive forces. There is an ambivalence, the origin of which would be

[...] in the difficulties inherent to the religious process of domination: as long as its bureaucracy or legitimacy is challenged, it, in crisis, seeks to renew its policy towards society and the State. To this end, it introduces a refined change in its methods of appropriating modern culture, aiming at its reproduction as an institutional reality (Romano, 1979, p. 64).

The same author recalls that in the dispute between the State and the Church

[...] the State increasingly incorporates the sacral weight of authority, and the Church, equally increasingly, incorporates rationality and science into its practice. With these weapons, the two institutions face each other in order to control culture, notably through education (Romano, 1979, p. 246).

In the context under analysis, the public debate environment may have favored the implantation of the MEB, as it had characteristics that were accepted by defenders of a more 'popular' education, both among Catholics and among segments of a more 'materialist' view, according to the language of the time. In short, despite the possible - and fierce - confrontations between the State, the Church and different social groups, moments of cooperation were also possible, when initiatives could be reconciled. It is important to underline, especially in relation to the process that would lead to the implementation of actions such as MEB, that it was not, from the Catholic point of view, a mere work of promoting social ascension, but of integrating contingents of excluded people in the sense of reinforcing one's religious belief, according to the Church's claims. However, such reinforcement would take place in new ways, in terms of a conscience considered more developed in social terms, which had the sympathy of a broader political spectrum.

This project, in its breadth, should include, above all, the poorest, due to the recognition of a socioeconomic reality that is very distant from the desired standards, both in the peripheries of large cities and in rural areas, notably in the North, Midwest and Northeast of the country. The action of Catholicism had already been felt with relative force in the urban environment, for example, in the

constitution of the Workers' Circles⁵. However, its influence had been declining, at least since the 1940s, due to the strengthening of state-style unions and the militancy of different left-wing anti-clerical groups in the workers' organization. The rural worker became, then, the target of disputes and the countryside in fertile territory of modernizing experiences, of all shades, such as the Peasant Leagues⁶, for example.

The way in which the fight against backwardness would take place, placing the country on a level appropriate to an imaginary evolutionary line, however, was not a consensus in society or even within the Church. Faced with this situation, how, then, can we understand the success of the agreement that instituted the MEB? Among a number of circumstances, one of the objective reasons lies in the expansion of the Church's capacity for social and political intervention from the founding of the CNBB, which is addressed in the next topic. But more than that, it was essential that the entity's control, for a long time, remained with a group of prelates, especially from northeastern dioceses, identified with the social struggle, constituting what became known as 'bishops of the Northeast'.

Thomas Bruneau cites eight bishops (in addition to Dom Helder Câmara, secretary general) who made up what he calls the 'first group' of CNBB. According to the author, "[...] through the CNBB, the bishops of the Northeast have become the most strategic and prominent, both in Rio and nationally, through their declarations, their programs and movements" (Bruneau, 1974, p. 198). Among them, together with Câmara, attention is drawn to Dom Eugênio Sales and Dom José Vicente Távora.

The general secretary was an undisputed leadership of the wing considered 'left' in the episcopate. His tenure in the seat for 12 years (1952-1964) was essential to guarantee privileged dialogue with sectors of society and the government and to legitimize initiatives by peers. Eugênio Sales, bishop of Natal, founded, in 1948, the Rural Assistance Service (SAR), with a broad educational and assistance program, which included the creation of regular schools, rural missions in the countryside, promotion of seminars and training courses for the clergy, in addition to supporting cooperatives and rural unionization.⁷ In 1950, SAR created radio schools, whose

⁵ The workers' circles, associations of Catholic-oriented workers, appeared in Brazil in the 1930s. They were one of the results of the greater involvement of lay Catholicism in the discussion of social ills, since the 1920s, under the inspiration of leading Catholic thinkers, such as Jacques Maritain, originating several groups inspired by the Church, such as the Catholic Electoral League, the Association of Catholic University Students and the Brazilian Catholic Action. This movement also had an effect within the working class, resulting in the creation of the Workers' Circles and, later, in the Brazilian Confederation of Christian Workers. On the subject, one can consult Souza (2002).

⁶ The Peasant Leagues were associations of rural workers created initially in Pernambuco and later in other regions of Brazil. They promoted intense political activity between the mid-1950s and the 1964 coup. Much has been published on the subject, and a summary book is that of Bastos (1984).

⁷ A detailed study of SAR's performance can be found in Ferraro (2019).

dissemination led to the creation of the National Representation of Catholic Broadcasters (RENEC) in 1958. This was one of the results of the mobilization made by ecclesiastical authorities to set up a network of Catholic broadcasters in Brazil, which had been occurring at least since 1955, when Franciscan friar Gil Bonfim presented a study inspired by the experience carried out in Colombia, under the coordination of Monsignor Jose Joaquin Salcedo, the *Acción Cultural Popular* (ACPO), broadcast by Radio Sutatenza, from 1947 (Fávero, 2006).

However, in order for the Catholic educational radio system to become effective in Brazil, the figure of José Vicente Távora was important, who is taken here as an example of the action of the episcopate. In 1959, the bishop founded the radio Cultura de Sergipe and then the Educational Radio System of Sergipe (SIRESE), which, similar to the Natal's initiative in 1958, comprised a network of radio schools under the responsibility of the diocese of Aracaju, experiences that would end up demonstrating, simultaneously, the educational difficulties and demands, especially of the populations of the interior, and the potential of radio education.

Távora, very close to Câmara, was a kind of elite active in relation to the social issue. The relationships established, throughout their ecclesiastical careers, with different social segments, by this group of 'bishops of the Northeast', of which the three mentioned here were exponents, made possible the forwarding of projects and demands received from different governments. And it is important to underline that such cooperation became possible in the 1950s, because, in many ways, the orientation of the government of Juscelino Kubitschek was shared by broad sectors of the Catholic Church, especially in the CNBB, then under the control of the so-called 'progressive sectors'.

However, even if there was identification around the modernizing idea, it is necessary to make a relativization. Osmar Fávero observes that the national developmental project was progressive, on the one hand, in proposing a more active integration in the international capitalist system; on the other hand, it had a conservative face, because it assumed the maintenance of the existing order as a premise and also because it privileged some areas considered dynamic, relegating sectors such as agriculture. Part of the Catholic Church, especially the bishops of the Northeast, faced with this contradiction, intended to make the population as a whole protagonist in development, in addition to technocratic planning. They also proposed a more balanced growth between the urban-industrial center-south and the rural sector, particularly in the Northeast. For that, agrarian reform was considered an urgent measure (Fávero, 2004). To support this assessment, note the opinion of Távora, in 1960:

We should be for development in terms of organic expansion, not in terms of industrialization alone. An organic development program should be devised

with a view to improving also rural populations, the most numerous and the most sacrificed in the whole country (A cruzada, 1961, transcribed from the magazine Synthesis, 1960 apud Nascimento, 2008, p. 71)

There is, then, between approximations and distances, a conjunction of factors that pass through personal aptitudes, network of relationships, common objectives and institutional seal to explain the possibility of a project - the MEB - that united the interests of the Church and the State in Brazil. Therefore, one should inquire about the fundamentals of this relationship.

MEANDERS OF POWER: CATHOLIC AGENCY IN GOVERNMENT

Despite the differences within the institutions - Church and State - and among them, the fact is that MEB was one of the most comprehensive and relevant experiences in the field of rural popular education via radio. This is also why its study allows to reflect on some aspects of this interinstitutional connection. The question posed here concerns the factors that made the established cooperation feasible at that juncture.

Analyzing the changes occurring in the Catholic Church in Brazil in the 20th century, Thomas Bruneau lists a series of categories from which the institution's trajectory is perceived:

1. Dominant organizational principle that describes the Church's perception of the environment in which it lives and the obstacles to achieving its general objective of influence [...].
2. The groups or sectors of society to which the Church pays particular attention [...].
3. Church-society relationship, or the way in which the organization seeks to connect with the larger environment.
4. The instruments or mechanisms with which the Church influences and generates engagement (Bruneau, 1974, p. 16).

Adapting this broader reflection to the period that concerns this article, it can be said that the perception of the country's economic and civilizational backwardness and the education as a way to overcome it was notorious; the group, particularly targeted in this regard, was that of rural workers; the link with the environment would take place through the clergy and action of the laity, via MEB. Evidently, in the exercise of influencing social life, different types of instruments and mechanisms operated, ranging from the direct action of the episcopate with public authorities to the work of orientation and organization of social segments from the base. What would be present, in any case, is the notion of 'influence'. Bruneau, based on Ivan Vallier, makes use of a relatively stripped-down definition of 'influence', but which serves the purposes of this study. This would be equivalent

to the capacity of an individual, a group, an association or even a State to generate enough engagements (loyalty, resources, support) to impose a direction of its choice on the structure and, thus, to bring about changes. Influential, then, would be the individual or the institution able to distinctively mark spheres of interest or activities (Bruneau, 1974). However, the mechanism or the basis for the exercise of influence is political power, hence the complexity and the need to observe changes in the State's relations with the Church in Brazil (Bruneau, 1974).

It cannot be disregarded that 'influence' is exercised through concrete actions, and these, in the period in question, were still strongly linked to the mobilizing capacity of the ecclesiastical elite. Hence the importance of the CNBB, the body responsible for proposing themes on the Catholic agenda at the governmental level, that is, to influence government actions towards its interests.

The founding of the Conference of Bishops in 1952 marked a moment that was both an effect and a cause for a reorientation of the nature of the links between Church and State:

In short, the most decisive event for the Church was the institutionalization of the CNBB, which allowed for a variety of autonomous relationships. Instead of relying on traditional links with the State and elements of local power, the CNBB could choose and promote its own orientation and support those who, within the government, thought the same way. New alliances became possible and the Church's goals of social change took advantage of them (Bruneau, 1974, p. 208).

The point to be emphasized is that, differently from other moments, this renewed episcopate assumed commitments - essential to the 'objectives of social change' - whose implementation could not do without the political sphere. The author's statement, in this sense, emphasizes a fundamental aspect of the current situation:

Instead of pretending that the Church was still 'above politics', representing 'all the best in Brazilian tradition', the CNBB group knew it was cooperating with the state. Understanding his relationship with the State, it could, presumably, control it instead of being trapped by it [...] (Bruneau, 1974, p. 208, emphasis added).

This group "[...] was closely allied with important political leaders of the period; leaders who were progressive and presumably were promoting change" (Bruneau, 1974, p. 208). This proximity involved sharing objectives and also dealing with relationships between elite groups, such as the top of the government and the

episcopate, whose power of 'influence', as defined above, was enhanced by an institution that was beginning to gain strength, the CNBB.

Based on contributions from sociology, one can think of the position of bishops as a religious elite, even though this constitutes, however, a "[...] peripheral theme in the agenda of studies on leading groups" (Seidl, 2017, p. 35). What is strange, therefore, "[...] considering the central socio-political role of the Church and its position in the space of power in Brazil, the sociological interest in the high Catholic hierarchy would dispense greater justifications" (Seidl, 2017, p. 36), a point of view that is shared, especially considering the period in question.

Analyzing the Brazilian episcopate from such assumptions, the same researcher points to some basic elements:

Although invariably denied by the chosen, the rise to the episcopate represents one of the most evident forms of distinction in the face of the Church's professional body. It is synonymous with a successful religious journey, supported by access to the central function not only in the Catholic sphere, but also in the space of power, notably symbolic power. [...] In addition to managing the distribution of an important part of the religious body, defining its ways of acting, it is an interpreter of the principles and practices of the Church and can speak legitimately on behalf of an institution that enjoys, in the case of Brazil, with a prominent position within the country's social structure and the public sphere (Seidl, 2017, p. 37).

It should be noted that the position of the bishop implies distinction, the result of a successful trajectory, which gives access to different instances of power, in addition to institutional walls. This is enhanced, in the Brazilian case, by the strength that Catholicism has historically demonstrated. In addition, special mention should be made of the 'directive' and 'administrative' aspect of ascending to the episcopate, a topic to which we will return.

To exemplify these considerations and bring them closer to the circumstances of the constitution of the MEB, consider the field of possibilities of Dom José Vicente Távora, the main articulator of the movement, from his trajectory in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Son of a large family, with tradition in the Catholic Church, for having already sent members to the clergy and to female congregations, which compensated for the relatively modest family patrimony, he graduated from an elite school, the Seminary of Olinda, "[...] secularly recognized and legitimized as an education center for the privileged, [which] certainly provided him with a quality education, and without a doubt, at the time, reserved for a few" (Santana, 2011, p. 52). In other words, it was provided with an environment that favored the formation of important influence networks for the future.

From his ordination, the priest turned to social issues, then fundamental to the institution, by diagnosing extreme poverty and facing the advance of leftist ideologies. He was linked to groups that sought to organize workers, such as Workers' Circles and Catholic Workers' Youth. His attention to the poor, however, was neither exclusive nor exclusionary, as it is relevant to realize that his insertion in various institutions, within the Church (Independent Catholic Women's League, LBA, among others), contributed to the accumulation of significant social and political capital, mainly during the period when Távora was active in the federal capital (Rio de Janeiro), providing contacts with the circles of power, in addition to its pastoral action among the poor and workers (Nascimento, 2008). His proximity to the powers of the Republic intensified with his appointment as auxiliary bishop of Rio de Janeiro, in 1954. This position and the fact that he was in the federal capital were fundamental to the expansion of his network of influence. For Ernesto Seidl (2017, p. 51-52),

Already invested with authority [auxiliary bishops], they have the opportunity to raise organizational capital and relationships through training in very diverse activities of daily organization of complex dioceses, at the same time that they are exposed with greater intensity to the mechanisms of high ecclesiastical power and standards of office.

MECHANISMS PROPER FROM ABOVE. ECCLESIASTICAL POWER AND STANDARDS OF OFFICE.

According to the author's assessment, it can be inferred that, as Távora ascended the hierarchy, his responsibilities and capacity for intervention increased. From the top of his positions in the hierarchy, which culminated with the archbishopric of Aracaju, he participated in numerous initiatives in favor of a project of social and human development, according to the religious orientation of the group to which he belonged and his own political inclinations.

There are several records of actions involving the prelate, especially private meetings, meetings and correspondence exchanged with heads of state (Juscelino Kubitschek, Jânio Quadros, João Goulart and even military leaders), in order to address demands of a social nature - in that context MEB was one among many other initiatives. Despite his popular political choice for the workers and the poor, it must be remembered that he was in a position to establish relations with government bodies - and his meetings with presidents are emblematic. But it is postulated that all of this had an effect only because there was a correspondence of thought between government and Church in another sense as well: that of the general conception of projects and the preparation of executors in rationalist, technical terms, including bishops and their lay advisory teams.

In the dispute for sovereignty in the field of culture, mainly through education, the Church, pressed by the times, incorporated modernizing practices. In addition, their leaderships increasingly assumed the behavior of administrators, with demands that went far beyond catechetical action. Seidl (2017, p. 36-37) notes that

The multiplication of seats and roles known within [the Church], especially since the 1950s, amplified by the alterations of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), shaped a progressively diversified institution. A more varied structure of services corresponded to specific requirements of its professionals - priests, bishops, nuns and brothers -, who were asked to take on tasks in a myriad of pastorals, commissions, councils, bodies, advisors, media.

In other words, the Church, more than spiritual guidance, started to provide technical, religious or lay cadres, to engage in the modernizing claim, in partnership with the government. In this sense, the administrative plan presented by Távora when he arrived as bishop of Aracaju is emblematic, as it encompasses issues typical of political power. Among its axes are, for example, rural electrification programs (for which the diocese would provide didactic material, technicians and training); sponsorship of agricultural clubs and establishment of rural unions across the state, under the control of the 'new Church', that is, closer to the daily reality of the Church members; creation of a working group to think about the industrialization of the State, based on the use of local raw materials; creation of warehouses and storage silos. The systematization of such studies and ideas would contribute decisively to the creation of the Northeast Development Superintendency (SUDENE), an undertaking in which the 'bishops of the Northeast' had a central role (Santana, 2011).

Thus, there was a concern and a commitment to action to unite the interests of the Church and the State. There were several projects on the agenda, but rural education was the priority. This, for two basic reasons: the perception of the poverty of the countryside and a vision of the future that considered the inevitability of agrarian reform, an omnipresent theme in the current situation. In the words of the archbishop,

Because the same concern that occurs to us in relation to the urban workers makes us anxious when we think of millions of rural workers that it is time to attend to complete programs of social and educational cooperation, even to create the environment conducive to the agrarian reform that is coming, which is knocking on our door, unfortunately without that necessary preparation for solutions designed to change the economic and social physiognomy of an entire people (Távora, 1958 apud Santana, 2011, p. 87).

It was the Church adapting to the century and trying to anticipate it. A relevant aspect is that the prelate assumed certainty in relation to the stages of development that brought them closer to the left-wing discourse - although liberal sectors also shared this perception. The reform of the land structure would come, changing 'the economic and social physiognomy of an entire people', and people should be prepared to do so. There is, then, synthetically, a manifestation of a member of a specific type of elite, endowed with administrative preparation, relative power and legitimacy conferred by the institution that housed it. Together with other elite groups, from a privileged position, their performance exemplifies the return of the Church's leading role in the State.

There are countless reports of personal meetings and correspondence between bishops and heads of government. In November 1958, Távora wrote to President Juscelino Kubitschek, describing the difficulties and poverty of Sergipe and the Northeast region and making some explicit requests for funds. It is relevant to note that he addressed the 'friend' and referred to 'previous conversations' (Santana, 2011), in one of the many demonstrations of access to central power.

The strengthening of such relationships and their institutionalization can be seen at key moments in the past history of MEB and other initiatives, such as during the two Meetings of the Bishops of the Northeast (Campina Grande, 1956 and Natal, 1959). The President of the Republic, Juscelino Kubitschek, was present at both. In these meetings, cooperation between Church and government was refined, resulting in several practical measures with the objective of seeking solutions for the development of the Northeast (Peixoto Filho, 2003). In one of the federal decrees derived from the suggestions and recommendations of the Second Meeting, government support was foreseen in the establishment of financing measures for a Basic Education Program through radio schools targeting the entire region (Peixoto Filho, 2003). This ambitious expansion project followed the path of the Natal and Sergipe initiatives.

In the 1960 presidential campaign, the prelate, already archbishop of Aracaju, presented his radio school project to Jânio Quadros and also to Henrique Teixeira Lott (Gois Barros apud Nascimento, 2008), who came in second place. After the election, but even before taking office, Távora again addressed the elected president. The letter, later published in the newspaper *A cruzada*, dealt specifically with the basic education program.

Divine Providence wanted me to stay at the core of the matter, under the circumstances, and thus be chosen to write to you on behalf of many, in order to open the last stage of a vigorous and redemptive journey in which you, as Head of Government, cannot fail to be a main figure of the command (*A cruzada*, 1960 apud Nascimento, 2008, p. 149).

In this presentation that the archbishop makes of the political actors involved, the tone of modesty and appreciation of the president's position is protocol, but demonstrates the relevance of the sectors involved. After making assessments and justifications regarding the conditions of misery in the rural area and the priority character that should be faced, the prelate continued:

In view of these considerations, Mr. President, the Brazilian episcopate, in addition to other sectors of national life, of which *O Cruzeiro* - which was already concerned with this problem and on behalf of which I also speak - stands out - wishes to give you this flag of extraordinary human greatness, that is, to free these millions of our brothers from their evils, from the evils of ignorance, in a gesture equivalent to a second abolition of slavery (*A cruzada*, 1960 apud Nascimento, 2008, p. 149).

Discounting any rhetorical exaggeration, this passage is significant for important mentions. The 'Brazilian episcopate' appears united to other sectors, and a prestigious and nationwide communication vehicle 'in whose name' claimed to speak the religious, is highlighted, showing previous arrangements between certain spheres. The magazine *O Cruzeiro*, in that country of illiterates, was elite and had a modern tone. It served, in this case, for both aspects, as a kind of seal, endorsement of a more advanced sector of society that, however, was far from the left-wing discourse.

After such indications of those involved, however, Távora would make it very clear who, really, would be in charge of the undertaking:

I can tell you that the plans are studied; the system is found; pilot experiments, previously launched for further expansion throughout Brazil, which have already been crowned with success; technical personnel are in training; the national, organized and permanent mobilization for the 'Movement' can be made especially by the episcopate, without any doubt (*A cruzada*, 1960 apud Nascimento, 2008, p. 149-150, emphasis added).

In other words, control and operation, almost total, would be with the CNBB and, particularly, at that juncture, with the bishops of the Northeast. The question of financing remained, and in that sense the letter exposes a very important aspect of the State/Church relationship. According to Távora, there would be "[...] no need for special funds on the part of the Federal Government, all that is needed is the application of those destined to literacy and adult and adolescent education, which were always underestimated budget funds with no system or income, like you know" (*A cruzada*, 1960 apud Nascimento, 2008, p. 149-150). The archbishop refers to a transfer of public resources previously assigned to one of the primary functions of

the state, education. Part of these funds would then be managed and applied in a program under the responsibility of the Catholic Church, an institution under private law, which, anchoring itself in its social relevance, presented itself as the most efficient agent to carry out this function.

The President-elect responded by stating that he considered “[...] auspicious cooperation is opportune with the conclusions of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil, which chose you as the highest interpreter” (*A Cruzada*, 1960 apud Nascimento, 2008, p. 151). He said he already knew the pilot experience of radio education in Sergipe and that he considered plans to extend it to the country as objectives. “In line with the national emergency, in its structure, I will recommend their own government bodies to study them so that they incorporate their suggestions into the official literacy policy of millions of Brazilians” (*A cruzada*, 1960 apud Nascimento, 2008, p. 151). Three significant points stand out: the tone, while still being enthusiastic, is more cautious than that of its correspondent; in addition, the CNBB, of whom Távora would be the ‘interpreter’, was elected as interlocutor and partner, putting collaboration in more institutional terms; finally, an aspect that falls outside the scope of analysis of this article, but that must be mentioned: the president spoke of literacy, when the objectives of the MEB were more ambitious, dealing with the fight against illiteracy as an initial step towards awareness and individual freedom.

In the reply, there was also mention of the magazine cited by the archbishop: “I have as an important success factor the help that your letter registers, from an organ that penetrates the whole country, like *O Cruzeiro*” (*A cruzada*, 1960 apud Nascimento, 2008, p. 151). Finally, the promise: “As soon as I take office, I will mobilize the collaboration that it offers” (*A cruzada*, 1960 apud Nascimento, 2008, p. 151). Commenting on this exchange of correspondences, Távora said that he was, then, “[...] representing the leadership of the national body of the Brazilian episcopate and [...] some other groups of the greatest value” (*A cruzada*, 1960 apud Nascimento, 2008, p. 152). The presence of CNBB and the other ‘value’ groups would guarantee not only competent execution, but also freedom from the propagated leftist dangers. This seems to come from another comment by the prelate. He praised the ‘vibration’ of the president on the topic of education, especially of the ‘peasant brothers’. He then added that the MEB intended to “[...] be the key to a new moment for our underdeveloped areas, towards a path towards the social liberation to which our people are entitled. The episcopate’s agreement with the President of the Republic is the tone of security for this path to be followed” (*A cruzada*, 1960 apud Nascimento, 2008, p. 153). After mentioning an unequivocal progressive social sense, the safe terms in which the path was being paved were remembered.

Quadros, right at the beginning of the government, effectively met the demand. The agreement, previously agreed between the Minister of Education and Culture, Brígido Tinoco, and the CNBB, for whom the general secretary, Dom Helder

Câmara was responsible, established the bases for the fulfillment of Decree 50.370 (1961), published in the official journal of Union on March 22 of the same year.

ACHIEVING PROXIMITY: ANALYSIS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL DECREE 50.370

The decree “Provides for a basic education program, and adopts necessary measures for its implementation through Radio Schools in the underdeveloped areas of the North, Northeast and Center-West of the country to be undertaken by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil” (Decree 50.370, 1961)⁸. It should be noted that the instrument was established within the scope of the presidency, because, according to the article referred to in the document (number 87, item I, of the 1946 Constitution, then in force), it would be ‘privately’ to this “[...] sanction, promulgate and make public the laws and issue decrees and regulations for their reliable execution”.

This mention is important because it corroborates, to a large extent, what has been argued about the function of proximity to power, among elite circles. In the Brazilian society of the period, there was a great debate, involving the Church intensely, around issues related to education, which would culminate in the LDB, processed in Congress for 13 years and published at the end of 1961. Despite this, the institutionalization of the MEB took place through an agreement / decree resulting from a more direct arrangement between the Executive Branch and the Catholic leadership. On the part of the government, there was a legal basis supported by the presidential prerogative and, therefore, guarantee of legitimacy. From the point of view of the Church’s role, the text of the legal document itself allows to perceive some aspects that clarify the issue.

In the first article, the decree states that the “Federal Government ‘will honor’ the Movimento de Educação de Base (MEB)”, which will be “[...] ‘undertaken’ by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil in the underdeveloped areas of North, Northeast and Center-West” (Decree 50370, 1961, emphasis added). The use of verbs in the imperative, typical of such a legal instrument, and in the future tense, follows throughout the document. In the case of ‘will honor’, it seems to have the sense of endorsing the expansion of a project considered to be successful, due to “[...] the experience acquired and the results already presented by the Radio Schools [...]”, as observed in the initial considerations. It also draws attention to the protagonism given to the movement, that the expression will be ‘undertaken’ demonstrates. This is reinforced by the following article, in which it is predicted that the MEB “[...] ‘will execute’ a five-year plan 1961-1965 during which it will ‘install’ 15,000 (fifteen thousand) Radio Schools in 1961 and, in subsequent years,

⁸ In 1963, it would be changed by the João Goulart government (Decree 52267, 1963), increasing the Movement’s coverage area.

‘will take’ necessary steps so that the expansion of the radio school network is always greater than that of the previous year” (Decree 50370, 1961, emphasis added). In other words, there is an evident action of delegation of public function to the CNBB, on whom the entire executive part would fall.

As for the expenses, the third article ensured that, “In order to incur the expenses of 1961, the Federal Government will determine the agencies that participate in this program to highlight their budgets in the amount of Cr \$ 414,300,000.00 [...]”, which would be “[...] available to MEB through bimonthly quotas provided in advance” (Decree 50370, 1961). For subsequent years (1962-1963-1964 and 1965), according to article four, “[...] the cooperating bodies mentioned in Article 8 shall include in their respective budget proposals the ‘specific’ and ‘necessary’ appropriations to meet the plan of MEB” (Decree 50370, 1961, emphasis added). The tone of unrestricted collaboration by the government remains in the sequence. Article number 6 allowed the MEB National Directing Council to “[...] ask the President of the Republic to ‘request’ federal employees for services deemed essential to the Movement's objectives” (Decree 50370, 1961, emphasis added).

Article seventh provided MEB “[...] to establish agreements with federal public agencies [...] ‘whose collaboration is considered necessary for the execution of its programs and action plans’ [...], which should be submitted to the appreciation of the President of the Republic” (Decree 50370, 1961, emphasis added). In addition to the mere presidential evaluation, and making the text a little less generic, the eighth article pointed to the priorities and possibilities of partnership with specific sectors of the government:

The following sectors of the federal public administration will collaborate with MEB, [...]

a) the Ministry of Education and Culture, especially for the National Campaign for Rural Education, for the National Campaign for Adult Education, for the National School Lunch Campaign, for the Campaign to Eradicate Illiteracy and for the National Radio Educational System;

b) the Ministry of Agriculture, especially the Superintendency of Agricultural and Veterinary Education, the National Department of Plant Production, the National Department of Animal Production, the Agricultural Information Service, the Rural Economy Service, the National Immigration and Colonization Institute;

c) the Ministry of Health through the National Department of Rural Endemics, especially its Health Education Service, the National Health Education Service and the National Child Department;

- d) the Ministry of Aeronautics for the Brazilian Air Force Transport Services;
- e) the Ministry of Traffic and Public Works by the Technical Radio Commission, the National Department of Posts and Telegraphs, the National Department of Works Against Drought and the National Department of Works and Sanitation;
- f) Cooperating bodies will also be considered the Northeast Development Superintendence, the Rural Social Service, the São Francisco Valley Commission and the Amazon Valorization Superintendence (Decree 50370, 1961).

In addition to the unmistakable willingness to put various sectors of the government to cooperate with the movement, the article also highlights an ambition that goes far beyond literacy. The involvement of so many areas of public administration seems to correspond to the wider claims of the Church - here, in harmony with the government.

Finally, Article 9 stated that, within 45 days, “[...] the cooperating bodies indicated in it must establish agreements with the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil” (Decree 50370, 1961). Thus, the closure led to the implementation of actions within the scope of the ministries and the CNBB, sealing a partnership whose foundations were much earlier. The document, in general, reinforced the perception of the prestige of the episcopate and of confidence, especially in relation to the alternatives of the left, in the Church. Hence this delegation of a State assignment. The decree, therefore, consists of a valuable example, among many, of the complex interinstitutional relationship explored here.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout the text, we sought to address an aspect still poorly observed in the studies on the MEB, that of the socio-political intricacies that made its constitution feasible, aiming at perceiving how, within an officially secular State, it could be built, justified and signed an agreement by which the Brazilian federal government financed a movement proposed and coordinated by the Catholic Church.

If modernization, linked to the developmentalist ideology, was a kind of spirit of the time, permeating the whole of society, the views on the issue were different, with the Church presenting some specificities. This circumstance was linked to the fact that the Church, as an institution, has characteristics of very specific orientation and practices, which helps to contextualize its position at the juncture of the period.

From the configuration described, the agency of Catholicism was approached at the governmental level, that is, the capacity for influence - in the terms as defined here - with the central power. This possibility of action, as we tried to demonstrate, was closely linked to the position of the episcopate as an elite group, therefore, as a privileged interlocutor. It is a fundamental point to the general argument of this article, to clarify some details about the approximations between the main governmental and religious agents involved in the officialization of the movement.

Finally, the document that represented the official culmination of the MEB constitution process was analyzed. The general language and the meaning of its determinations demonstrate, it is believed, the practical result of a process in which the Church, through the mechanisms analyzed, assumed the direction and execution of a project inserted in one of the main functions of the State: elementary instruction.

What was one of the most relevant movements - in terms of mobilizing people - in the history of popular education in Brazil is, recurrently, considered 'leftist'. This is due to the engaged character of its speech, the effective concern with the inclusion of the poorest in the economic and social life of the most modern part of society. As a leftist, it was fought, in numerous moments of its trajectory, and had his initial orientation changed during the dictatorship. Nevertheless, there is a certain paradox perceived in the constitution of the MEB. It was instituted, as it was tried to demonstrate, through a flow of influences perceived among elite circles. Thus, the relations established between the episcopate and government bodies, notably the president himself, demonstrate some aspects that can help to better understand the complex history of the links between the Church and the Brazilian State.

The peculiarities of the analyzed arrangements also allow to capture something of the intricate political and social context of the period. This was an era in which, despite the drama - indeed, justified - of the diagnoses about the situation of the poor, optimism prevailed, somewhat paradoxically. And that was the result of an environment permeated with visions of the future and projects that would approach the majority of the population. The MEB, arguably, was one of these projects, and the history of its establishment makes it a precious object to reflect on the trajectory of education in Brazil.

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