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# New Christendom's Rout: Jacques Maritain and Catholic Social Activism in Twentieth-Century Brazil

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**Abstract**

Among Catholic intellectuals in the mid-twentieth century, the influence of Neo-Scholastic philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) was felt far beyond the writer's native France. Beginning in the 1920s, Maritain enjoyed a particularly eager reception in Brazil, where thinkers and activists, clerics and laypeople alike valued his keen interest in political theory and debated his vision of an "integral humanism" as a response to the modern condition. Yet, as the ecclesial reforms inspired by the Second Vatican Council coincided with the Brazilian military's ousting of President João Goulart in 1964, Maritain's ideal of a Thomistic "New Christendom" was increasingly contested. This study traces the changing attitudes towards Maritain's project among midcentury Brazilian Catholics through interviews found in the Robert J. Alexander Papers. Alexander, a pioneer of contemporary labor history, recorded thousands of interviews with Latin American social activists across his long career. Among these were dozens of conversations held with Brazilian clerics and labor organizers in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite their continued relevance, however, Alexander's papers remain available only on microfilm, their importance obscured by their lack of easy access. This study aims to distill some of Alexander's findings for a wider audience, as well as to incorporate French- and Portuguese-language scholarship on Brazilian matters of church and state for anglophone readers.



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Alexander's interviews shed light on those seismic shifts in faith and culture that changed the face of Catholic Brazil — shifts about which Maritain had much to say, but his answers activists on both the left and the right came to find wanting.

*Keywords:* Jacques Maritain, Neo-Scholasticism, Christian Democracy, Brazil, Labor Activism, Robert J. Alexander

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> We should strive to the utmost to bring that spiritual Christendom down into the arena of the temporal and to realize it in political Christendom; may it be considered probable at present? A Christian political order in the world is not to be artificially constructed by diplomatic means; it is a product of the spirit of faith… [But] we are far from such an ideal.
>
> — Jacques Maritain, *The Primacy of the Spiritual* (1939)

In a 1974 address at the University of Chicago, archbishop and human rights activist Hélder Câmara called on contemporary theologians to "do with Karl Marx what St. Thomas [Aquinas], in his day, did with Aristotle" (McCann 1978, 140). The aim of Câmara's appeal was clear: the assimilation of a comprehensive philosophical framework with traditional Catholic teaching in service of the oppressed and marginalized. In Brazil, such rhetoric was the culmination of decades of progressive advocacy on the part of both clerics and the Catholic laity. Attitudes toward democracy, capitalism, and labor among these activists were heavily influenced by the thought of French Neo-Scholastic philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882-1973).

Movements such as Catholic Action, student organizations, and the *círculos operários* (workers' circles) throughout the Brazilian republic were all indebted to Maritain's political theory to varying degrees. Nevertheless, by the 1960s, his approach was called increasingly into question, contested as it was by a repressive military dictatorship and religious reforms stemming from the Second Vatican Council. As interviews from the Robert J. Alexander Papers illustrate, the decade's turbulence caused activists and ideologues alike to go beyond Maritain's prescriptions — proving them too progressive for the right and too conservative for the left.

Robert J. Alexander was a pioneer of Latin American labor history. Among the thousands of interviews he recorded across the region were discussions with Brazilian clerics and labor organizers in the 1950s and 1960s. Since his papers remain limited to microfilm, though, their continuing importance can be obscured by lack of easy access. The present study employs testimony from the Alexander interviews to supplement the existing literature on Catholicism in twentieth-century Brazil, including the works of Ralph Della Cava (1976; 1989) and political scientist Scott Mainwaring (1986), as well as Colin M. Snider (2016) and James Chappel's (2018) recent analyses of Catholic social activism. Further, the reception of Maritain's thought is traced through contributions from religious historian Dennis McCann (1978), noted sociologist Michael Löwy (Löwy and García-Ruiz 1997), and Brazilian scholars Lorena Madruga Monteiro and André Drumond (2011). This paper also seeks to make international scholarship accessible to an anglophone audience, incorporating perspectives that have hitherto been available only in French and Portuguese. While the intersections of Neo-Scholasticism in Brazil have received insufficient attention from historians, here they are understood as a unique window onto the upheavals in religion and society that changed the face of the largest Catholic nation in the

Americas. These were challenges about which Maritain had much to say, but whose answers Brazilians across the political spectrum came to find wanting.

As a disciple of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Maritain drew a new political theory out from old theological wineskins. After leaving behind the reactionary monarchism of the *Action française* movement in the 1920s, he became a critic of the twentieth century's reigning socioeconomic orders: communism, fascism, and liberal capitalism. Across works such as *Integral Humanism* (1936), *Christianity and Democracy* (1942), and *The Person and the Common Good* (1947), as well as in lectures throughout Europe and the Americas, Maritain developed what he termed "New Christendom" as an alternative to all three systems. Rooted in the Thomistic understanding of man as a rational animal destined for God, New Christendom surpassed the anachronisms of its medieval predecessor to meet the exigencies of the modern age. Its central theoretical tenet conceived the temporal order as existing for itself with its own intermediary end, or "infravalent end" in Maritain's language, rather than solely as a means to the supernatural end of heaven (Echeverria 2001, 245-49). In practice, this meant a lay-centric vision of civil society rather than a strictly hierarchical order, and an appreciation for cultural and religious pluralism stemming from Maritain's high view of individual human dignity (McCann 1978, 155-56). Moreover, he built on the nineteenth-century social teaching of Pope Leo XIII in regarding democracy as a necessity for social justice, necessary in turn for a community properly ordered to God and to a true account of human nature (Monteiro and Drumond 2011, 60-61). In short, he spoke for those seeking a Christian *via media* between socialist oppression and capitalist exploitation.

Maritain's thought enjoyed a wide currency in South America, playing a decisive role in the development of Christian democratic parties across the continent. French historian Olivier Compagnon (2003) has even gone so far as to call Maritain "the model despite himself" for Catholic activists in the region, since the time he actively spent in Latin America was minimal. He enjoyed a particularly enthusiastic reception in Brazil nonetheless. According to Father Domingos Crippa of São Paulo, editor of the philosophy review *Convivium*, most Brazilian intellectuals in his day still adhered to the "Positivism of the nineteenth century, together with a very badly digested Marxism, also of the nineteenth century" (Crippa 1965, frame 1074). With this, Crippa indicated his belief that Brazil lagged decades behind Europe in intellectual innovation. Whatever their novelty, Catholics also exhibited the social consciousness associated with Marxism — "badly digested" or no — by following trends in French theology, intensely preoccupied as it was with questions of politics. Beginning in the late 1920s, the lay political activist Alceu Amoroso Lima became the chief conduit for introducing Brazilians to Maritain and a whole circle of other French thinkers (Löwy and García-Ruiz 1997, 14-15). After returning from a stay in Paris and converting to Catholicism as a young man, Lima helped the Brazilian Church to move out of the nineteenth-century mindset so derided by Father Crippa.

The consequences of Lima's efforts were significant. In 1966, Archbishop João Batista da Mota e Albuquerque of Vitória, in the state of Espírito Santo, noted that if one were to look in his library, one "would see how many French books there [were] in it." He judged this to be "fairly typical of the situation among the more progressive elements of the Church" (Da Mota e Albuquerque 1966, frame 1089), and was thanks in part to Lima's activism and the Portuguese translations he undertook of Maritain's works (Löwy and García-Ruiz 1997, 16). From the 1930s,



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moreover, the state of Rio Grande do Sul alone was home to two Catholic journals — *Idade Nova* and *Estudos* — in which Maritain's name constantly recurred. One issue of *Estudos* from 1941 identified Thomism as both "perennially traditionalist" and "fundamentally progressive," and progress as "the incorporation of truth in its entirety, even that discovered by one's adversaries," just as Aquinas had done in his appropriation of classical thought. Under this estimation, Maritain was equally correct in seeking to adapt "the *modus* of medieval thought," free of the distortions that had "unbalanced modern thought," to contemporary circumstances (Monteiro and Drumond 2011, 62-63). In other words, the synthesis of ancient metaphysics and Christian revelation that defined Aquinas' project could serve as an exciting basis for renewal amid the travails of the modern age.

This medieval *modus* also translated into action outside of academic spheres. Cardinal Sebastião Leme da Silveira Cintra of Rio de Janeiro founded Brazilian Catholic Action (*Ação Católica Brasileira*, ACB) in 1936 and placed Lima at its helm, a position he would hold for the following nine years (Löwy and García-Ruiz 1997, 16-18). The Vatican under Pope Pius XI recognized Catholic Action, a movement found in several countries around the world, as "an organization of laymen participating in the hierarchical apostolate of the Church, outside of any political affiliation in order to establish the universal reign of Jesus Christ" (Della Cava 1976, 15). Local chapters were founded throughout the republic to "regain for Our Lord Jesus Christ the modern world," and counted a young Hélder Câmara among its ranks (Mainwaring 1986, 30). After decades of social work on the part of ACB, leaders such as Archbishop Nivaldo Monte of Natal could praise the apostolate for establishing a "Social Service School" and "radio educational program" in the state of Rio Grande do Norte. Monte also credited ACB as a

forerunner to the influential Movimento de Natal, which went on to provide a similar outlet for lay activism in the late twentieth century (Monte 1966, frame 1093). All this reflected Maritain's vision, both "traditionalist" and "progressive," of lay organization outside party structures to effect authentically Catholic social change.

Still, ACB's work did not go without controversy. Though Cardinal Leme was a well-known conservative, lay activism was treated with suspicion in the Church's more reactionary wings. In 1943 Antônio de Castro Mayer, who had once worked with ACB as a young priest, condemned the apostolate's debt to Maritain as the fruit of "modernism," the intellectual bête noire of Catholic reactionaries (Della Cava 1976, 35). Significantly, he located Catholic Action's "modernism" in the relationship it fostered between laity and clergy. Father Ítalo Coelho attested that de Castro Mayer, after having been named a bishop in 1949, again targeted ACB in a "statement listing certain 'possible heresies.' This was because the priests… always took the position that they were not leaders of the organization, *but rather were its advisers and that the leadership had to come from the laymen*" (Coelho 1965, frame 1078; emphasis mine). There were political differences as well as theological ones. During the Spanish Civil War, for instance, Maritain was noted for his support of the Republicans over Franco's Nationalists — this at a time when many right-wing Catholics regarded the war as a struggle against godless communism — and further bolstered his liberal reputation in opposing the Vichy regime during World War II (Chappel 2018, 139-42). He was joined on both accounts by Lima in Brazil, adding to the false perception that his camp allied with forces hostile to the Church (Löwy and García-Ruiz 1997, 16). Neither was de Castro Mayer the only reactionary to attack ACB. The archconservative layman Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira, who went on to establish the international

Tradition, Family, Property movement (*Tradição, Família e Propriedade*; TFP) around the time of Vatican II, was equally virulent in his denunciation. While it would later face criticism from the left, then, the lay activism forwarded by Maritain first met opposition from the Catholic right.

*Círculos operários* (workers' circles) offered a similar mode of lay political mobilization. Inspired by Pope Pius XI's social encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, which furthered the Church's twin critique of socialism and capitalism, the first *círculo* was established in 1932 in Rio Grande do Sul (Della Cava 1976, 15). Father Pancrácio Dutra, S.J., explained that labor unions were virtually nonexistent in Brazil before the Vargas regime of the 1930s. In response, a fellow Jesuit "saw the need for Christian organization among the workers," and in time the cooperatives spread throughout the country (Dutra 1965, frame 40). If the *círculos* were the working-class analogue of the middle-class ACB, their organization appeared somewhat more conservative. The *Círculo Operário Católico* of Limeira, in São Paulo, can be taken as representative. In 1956, ecclesiastical adviser João Ferreira Neto noted that his *círculo* offered health care, legal services, sporting leagues, "lectures on Brazilian labor legislation," and "courses in public speaking" to the workers, though it lacked a "regular program for training leaders for the *sindicatos* [labor unions]." Father Neto himself gave instruction in Catholic social teaching; he also "gave orientation to the group," summing up the workers' discussions and holding the right to veto any member elected to the executive board (Neto 1956, frame 18). Here the *círculos* differed from Catholic Action in the more involved role taken on by priests, reducible to the Church's fear of communism infiltrating the labor movement. If such concern necessitated a

paternalism that was absent within ACB, by and large the *círculos* still retained Maritain's spirit of trust in the laity as a means of evangelization and social justice.

The 1960s, though, cast socioeconomic inequality in a shade of new intensity. Instability in Brazil was twofold, with political turbulence resulting from a right-wing military coup in 1964, backed by the United States government, and cultural and religious upheaval stemming from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Much like New Christendom, Vatican II sought reconciliation with select aspects of modernity and embraced a vision of greater lay participation in the Church. Particularly germane to Maritain's model of Christian democracy was the declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, which enshrined religious freedom as a positive right and taught that the Church need no longer officially ally with the state (Second Vatican Council 1965). In the Archbishop of Vitória's summation, at Vatican II the Church "might have been involved in kinds of experiments which would be very dangerous" had it been "taken over by the progressive element entirely… But if it had been completely dominated by the conservative element, it would have died" (Da Mota e Albuquerque 1966, frame 1089). Considering the volatile situation in his own country, the bishop's judgment seemed apropos. Nevertheless, as the Vatican's optimistic policy of *aggiornamento* gave way to radicalism in many corners of the Catholic world, the Brazilian left lost patience with Maritainian gradualism in its passionate opposition to the military dictatorship. The decade might have allowed Catholic activists to lobby for a Thomistic communitarianism within the political order, but they bypassed Maritain in favor of a more secular left.

The *círculos operários* clearly reflected this shift. Less than ten years after Father Neto's testimony, in 1965 Father Laércio de Figueiredo Pereira presided over the Brazilian

Confederation of Christian Workers (*Confederação Brasileira de Trabalhadores Cristãos*, CBTC). Headquartered in Rio de Janeiro, the CBTC made up the former *Confederação Brasileira de Círculos Operários*. Father Pereira affirmed that the "change in name signifie[d] a change in the organization" as well. For one, "white-collar workers [didn't] like the name '*operário,*'" which denoted manual or factory labor over middle-class professions. By contrast, the term *trabalhador* was found to be "more inclusive, and more attractive to white-collar workers." Gone too were the days of priests controlling executive elections and offering instruction in Catholic social teaching; whereas the old *círculos* engaged primarily in "social welfare and catechism work," the CBTC was "interested mainly in the trade unions and training workers for leadership in them." The programs that Father Neto had lacked in Limeira were now the *círculos'* central focus across Brazil. Father Pereira added that the new name also indicated a "break with the confessional nature of the organization." No longer open only to Catholics, the CBTC accepted Protestants and even non-Christians as members, which Pereira grouped under the term "Jews and Spiritualists," so long as they did not object to "Christian concepts in social and labor matters" (Pereira 1965, frame 19). Catholic unions thereby moved beyond their exclusivist religious identity in under a decade.

Though Maritain may have questioned the absence of catechesis in the CBTC, one can imagine him smiling on lay activists' collaboration with non-Catholics. Given his strong commitment to pluralism — as well as his personal friendship with American community organizer Saul Alinsky — he undoubtedly would have regarded Protestants and Jews in union training courses as an admirable example of ecumenical solidarity (Doering 1994). Yet the labor movement of the 1960s was also given to certain developments that Maritain would have

found more troubling. While serving as the CBTC's national ecclesiastical adviser, Father Dutra mentioned that communists were accepted in leadership training in addition to other religious groups. "Indeed," he asserted, "they are very helpful, because they raise questions in the classes, bring about controversy and make students think. They are lending a service to the classes, although they may not intend to be doing so" (Dutra 1965, frame 40). Despite his deep sympathy for Marxist social action as evidence of capitalism's sins, Maritain attacked Marxism as an ideology for the philosophically materialist assumptions at its core. For Maritain and many other Neo-Scholastics, whatever good might be found in socialism could not be separated from its denial of God and its inevitable tendency toward totalitarianism — hence the necessity for a different, altogether "integral" humanism (Monteiro and Drumond 2011, 62). Thus, as Catholic labor came to appear less and less distinctly Catholic, whether it could still serve as a model for New Christendom in Brazil was perhaps an increasingly complicated question.

The *círculos'* trajectory was staked out as the wider Church shifted in its response to the dictatorship (Snider 2016, 185). One year after President João Goulart's ousting in April 1964, Father Pereira claimed in 1965 that "all of the bishops, including Hélder Câmara [then the Archbishop of Olinda e Recife], thanked God for the Revolution" that had overthrown a democratically elected leftist, and "threw their support behind it." Moreover, he affirmed the CBTC's organizational support for the coup and believed that even "an armed insurrection against [Fidel] Castro would be perfectly justified" (Pereira 1965, frame 20). Whether or not such an insurrection would be supported by the Brazilian military, just a few years after the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis, was left unspecified. However, as the regime solidified its control through the latter half of the decade, clerics like Câmara could rightly

accuse the “pseudo-revolutionary government” of fearing “its own shadow” for persecuting the poor under the pretext of communist subversion (Câmara 1966, frame 1096). No irony was lost on progressives that Catholic supporters of the junta, including Bishop de Castro Mayer and his close ally Corrêa de Oliveira, should decry the lurking threat of communist oppression while turning a blind eye to censorship and the torture of political dissidents at home.

At the same time, the Church steadily turned its attention toward social questions more broadly. Father Pereira observed in 1965 that “the conservative wing of the Church [was] not very influential,” and that reports of ideological division were “exaggerated.” Given the failure of conservative prelates to organize at the National Bishops’ Conference of Brazil (*Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil*, CNBB) after Vatican II, an ecclesial progressivism indeed appeared ascendant. Pereira further noted that most of the Brazilian episcopate supported “agrarian reform and all major reforms which are needed here,” referring to ambitious programs of land expropriation and wealth redistribution designed to uplift the poor and disenfranchised (Pereira 1965, frame 20). These were initiatives that the government castigated as incipient communism, but which many progressives regarded as necessary for moving beyond the nation’s long legacy of slavery and discrimination (Della Cava 1976, 34). Less than thirty years earlier, Cardinal Leme had drawn ire from conservatives for his blessing of ACB. Now the *círculos* and the bishops alike began embracing a progressive Catholicism concerned with systemic social change.

Catholic University Youth (*Juventude Universitária Católica*, JUC) was another activist group that demonstrated these shifts. Established as a national organization in 1950 and comprised of the middle- and upper-class students at Brazil’s handful of universities, JUC drew



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heavily on Maritain's ideals and subordinated social work to the evangelization of the academy (Snider 2016, 187-89). Scott Mainwaring notes that its efforts in the 1950s reflected the Church's individualist definition of faith as "an *inward process* of having close *personal contact* with Jesus Christ in a *devotional sense*" (1986, 28; emphasis mine). Accordingly, in its early days it focused on pilgrimages, retreats, and religious conferences. Yet JUC became more attuned to politics as Brazilian Catholics challenged the dictatorship and socioeconomic stratification. Ironically, it was their devotion to Maritain that allowed student activists to call for a "Christian ideal" in response to capitalist modernity, and the same recognition that allowed them to bypass New Christendom for more radical strains of thought (Snider 2016, 190). Maritain's political prescriptions simply came to be regarded as insufficient among JUC activists in the 1960s. In the face of an ever-worsening crisis, something far bolder was required.

Nowhere was this more evident than at the Catholic University of Minas Gerais (UCMG). Located in Belo Horizonte, the university hosted one of the largest and most engaged JUC chapters in the nation. Contrary to much of the Brazilian Church, UCMG students forcefully opposed the military regime from the moment of Goulart's overthrow in April 1964; they organized at least two anti-government protests in the first months following the coup, even as Father Pereira affirmed Catholic labor's support for the junta after more than a year in power (Snider 2016, 196-97). Although internal divisions led to JUC's official dissolution in 1966, students were by no means hindered in their advocacy throughout the decade. Like the *círculos operários*, however, their activism took on an increasingly secular ethos as they looked leftward for inspiration. By 1968, for instance, graduating students at UCMG had selected Herbert Marcuse as their class's "patron," opting for a critical theorist from the Frankfurt School over a



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canonized saint (Snider 2016, 202). Their choice symbolized the definitive eclipse of Neo-Scholastic politics among a new generation of Catholic activists. In the spirit of the dialectic, many also critiqued the Church's principle of subsidiarity — the notion that social and political functions should be handled by the lowest competent authority — and called for economic organization far beyond what Catholic teaching, or Maritain, considered to be constitutive of social justice (Della Cava 1976, 42). While Maritain's alternative to modern ideology was as systematic as anything to be found on the New Left, the medieval *modus* he relied upon no longer seemed as useful as it once had.

The new priorities among Brazilians at midcentury would have a profound effect on the broader life of the Church. As James Chappel (2018) has recently argued, it was the experience of totalitarianism in the 1930s that forced European Catholics to grapple with modernity on its own terms, setting the stage for Christian democratic parties post-war and the Second Vatican Council in due course. The military coup of 1964 and human rights abuses committed by the dictatorship served a parallel function for the Church in Brazil. Indeed, what Carl Schorske referred to as the "politics in a new key" of fin-de-siècle Vienna might equally apply to the Catholic progressivism of the 1960s, which saw old models of Church and state either questioned or rejected altogether (Schorske 1980, 116-80). In this vein, Catholic labor's opening to non-Christians obeyed a similar logic as student appeals to Marx: if Vatican II proved that the Church should seek engagement with the world, then radical new frameworks could be adopted in service of the gospel. Such frameworks led directly into the *teologia da libertação* (liberation theology) of the 1970s and 1980s — often placing activists throughout Latin America at odds with the conservative papacy of John Paul II (Löwy and García-Ruiz 1997, 27).

It was only one year after Maritain's death in 1973 that Archbishop Câmara called for an Aquinas of the dialectic in Chicago. This coincidence does much to highlight the paradox of Neo-Scholasticism in Brazil. In his most mature political reflection, Maritain was both an antifascist and an anticommunist, eschewing easy identification with right or left; and while reactionaries had always looked on New Christendom with suspicion, the progressives he had once galvanized also found reason to move beyond his model. Both labored in service of the God who casts down the mighty from their thrones while lifting up the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things while sending the rich away empty (Luke 1:52-53). Yet Maritain's influence helped lay the foundations for the very advocacy that would pass him by. Though such lay-driven movements as Catholic Action, *círculos operários*, and student organizations owed their existence in no small part to Maritain's thought, interviews from the Alexander papers demonstrate that their union was not to last for Brazilians. Such were the conditions that allowed for a flourishing of leftist thought in the Catholic Church's largest national communion.

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