Helgen, Erika: Religious Conflict in Brazil. Protestants, Catholics, and the Rise of Religious Pluralism in the Early Twentieth Century

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As research contributions of recent years have shown, Brazil is confronted with an enormous diversification and pluralization of religion (Burity 2017, 2020). The vibrant plurality of religions makes the study of contemporary Latin American religions extremely relevant. However, analyses of the history of religious diversity exist comparatively rarely. Erika Helgen’s work, therefore, provides an excellent basis for understanding the history of religious pluralization and its local and global entanglements. Helgen is an Associate Professor of Latin American and Latinx Christianity. Her research and teaching interests include Brazilian religious history, the history of Latin American Protestantism, religion and migration, and religious violence. She received her Ph.D. in History from Yale University in 2015. In her dissertation, which was published in 2020, Helgen works through the history of religious pluralization in the early twentieth century and is excellent literature for understanding the historic transformation and its conflicts between catholic and protestant churches in rural Brazil.

To conduct data material, Helgen undertook research in the Brazilian northeast and came across primary sources that had previously gone unnoticed by historians. In her investigations in local churches and private archives, Helgen meticulously examined diary entries, private notes, family histories, newspaper articles, apologetic publications, and court records that shed light on historical events concerning religious conflicts in Brazil (p.24ff.). On this basis, Helgen elaborates the dynamic positions within a religious conflict that raged in the brazilian Northeast, especially in the decades between the 1920s and 1940s, of which echoes can still be heard today.

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Although religious pluralism is currently studied and addressed predominantly in the metropolises (see e.g. Oosterbaan 2017), Helgen directs the focus on the rural regions of northeastern Brazil and thus incorporates the local folklore and narrative traditions.

Chapter 1 of the book explains the historical conditions of the early twentieth century, linking to discourses within the Catholic Church that had to respond to the new presence of local Protestant churches in the region. Although the enormous growth figures of protestant adherents in Brazil are often used for contemporary research as relevant to the study of Protestantism in the second half of the twentieth century, Helgen points to the long and complex history of Protestantism in Brazil, in which there were repeated stagnations, reversals, and restarts. Helgen impressively demonstrates that long before Protestantism boomed in Brazil, Catholicism and Protestantism engaged in a long-standing conflict over visibility, national identity, citizenship, and public representation. The Catholic Church was very much aware of the activities of Protestant congregations at this time and responded to the protestant missionary activities early on thru educational programs, social organizations, and public discourses. Especially in the 1930s and the founding of the Estado Novo, Brazilian nationality and Catholic identity became discursively intertwined that there was to be no space outside of being Brazilian and being Catholic (p. 16). Protestantism in the first half of the twentieth century, therefore, meant being unpatriotic, anti-social, and posing a threat to the social order (Ibid). This argument runs like a thread through Helgen’s study, in that Protestantism was accused of being unpatriotic, victims of US cultural imperialism (p.102), or even being spies for the US government (p.129).

The decisive year for the starting point of the religious conflict, from which Helgen starts, is the global developments of world Christianity in the year 1916 and the Panama Congress. The Panama Congress was understood as a counterpart to the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburg, which had not addressed the issue of Latin America. At the conference, Protestants verbalized the demand that Latin America has to be proclaimed as a missionary country since Catholicism had paganized Christianity beyond recognition in this region. Catholicism’s response was a restoration that started in the same year and marks the beginning of a competitive contest for Brazil’s population. Although Catholicism held hegemonic supremacy in the Brazilian state through its alliance with the political elite since colonial times, it was by no means naturally shared by the population and had also an ambivalent relationship with the state authorities of the Estado Novo, especially in the northeast.

Chapter 2 describes the various forms of Protestantism in Brazil and addresses their internal struggles over the question of a common identity. In particular, Pentecostalism, with its physical expression, glossolalia, and emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit, which distinguished it from the Baptist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian churches, was a target of attack for the Integralist Catholics, in that it was suspected of not only of a backward, wild, and superstitious religion but also of collective fears and reservations about Pentecostalism, suspecting a new Canudos movement that could challenge the regional and local system of governance and lead to civil war-like conditions as in the nineteenth century (p.78; 149). Helgen also does not ignore the numerous and sometimes more violent lines of conflict between traditional
Protestants and Pentecostals, who also found themselves in a conflictual relationship of tension (p.79).

In Chapter 3, Helgen elaborates on the different positions of the actors and vividly depicts how the conflicts between Catholic and Protestant positions were acted out both symbolically and physically, with processions praying against Protestantism, invoking patron saints against the plague, or organizing stonings against Protestant adherents, as well as arsons of church buildings (p.111; 115f.). Remarkably, it must be emphasized that acts of violence against Protestants were often orchestrated by clerics (p. 96), such as priests and monks, who, as in the case of Padre Luiz Santiago (1897–1989) or Frei Damião (1898–1997), proclaimed prayerfully that “it is not a crime to kill a Protestant!” (p.114; see also p.135). Damião was praised as a saint by Catholics in the region during his lifetime, and in 2019, was granted the honorary title venerabilis Dei servus by Pope Francis, which is an intermediate step in the process of beatification (p.200; 224).

Chapter 4 follows up on the violent attacks against the Protestant rural population by Catholics in the late 1930s and deals with the judicial prosecution of crimes in the Estado Novo (p.120f.). Interestingly, through Getúlio Vargas (1882–1954), the Tribunal de Segurança Nacional (TSN) was charged with prosecuting crimes against religious minorities, so that religious conflicts were not prosecuted by local authorities but coordinated by national authorities. The TSN was originally established with the objective of investigating communist movements and other politically subversive groups that challenged the power of the political regime. Religious conflicts in the northeast were thus given the highest priority by the state to control the region. Protestantism and especially Pentecostalism in the Northeast were suspected by the TSE of religious fanaticism and of being associated with messianic and apocalyptic movements and ideas of the nineteenth century (p.148). In this sense, the political regime of the Estado Novo suspected danger, and authorities were accordingly alarmed. Likewise, the federal government suspected Catholicism in the region of religious fanaticism and cracked down on cases of violence associated with religious fanaticism. Court cases against Catholic priests who had previously orchestrated anti-Protestant violence were prosecuted insofar as “religious fanaticism” could be proven. However, the mere fact that Protestant churches were destroyed and people of other faiths were mistreated and killed was not yet sufficient for the TSE to take legal action and thus many crimes went unaddressed (p.155–7). Using the small town of Cuité as an example, Helgen outlines how Pentecostalism was nevertheless able to gain a foothold despite persecution and oppression and was able to form communities within a very short time (p.127).

This resulted in a shift of Catholic reforms, in that the Catholics made greater efforts in education and established primary and secondary schools for the rural population, in order to arm themselves intellectually against Protestantism but also Afro-Brazilian religions (p.128).

Chapter 5 describes the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in more detail by looking at the activities of the Catholic Church. Helgen describes the global entanglements in which Catholicism found itself in the early twentieth century and individual actors further fueled the anti-Protestant discourse. Charismatic Capuchin friars such as Frei Damião, who was born in Italy, are mentioned in the
context again, who received national attention as an emotional and eloquent speaker and had a crucial role in mobilizing people to take part in spiritual and violent activities against protestants (p.185). Also, Anti-Protestant rites by the Capuchins during the restorationist *Santas Missões* served to mobilize the Catholic population. In the processions, Catholics prayed that “the Holy Father will triumph and Protestantism will be defeated” (p.187). Public debates between Protestant pastors and Catholic clergy were also intended to contribute to pacification and refute Protestantism argumentatively. For the conflict between Catholics and Protestants, lay organizations had an important social hinge function to play out the interests of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church was already suffering from an enormous shortage of priests in the 1930s and found itself unable to fight the battle against Protestantism on the many small fronts opened up by the presence of new Protestant churches sprouting up like mushrooms during this period. Lay organizations, such as *Third Order*, were established and expanded and thus were not intended to replace *Catholic Action*, but rather to provide a bridge between the political and civic elite and the Catholic Church and to train for the lay apostolate (p.181).

In Chapter 6, Helgen describes how the Protestants tried to counterattack, using the charisma and popularity of Catholic actors like Frei Damião to discredit him and his followers as a threat to public order in Brazil by accusing Catholics of religious fanaticism and superstition (p.201). Some even went so far as to accuse Damião and his supporters of wanting to establish a new *Canudos* in Ceará (p.209). While many Protestants were in favor of the *Estado Novo* and identified with its motto of order and progress (*Ordem e Progresso*), they accused the Catholics of being unpatriotic, since they understood them as counterparts against progress and stand for a backward and superstitious hinterland (p.210).

Helgen’s research is valuable precisely because it captures and reflects the reflexive and dynamic discourses of a crucial decade in Brazil’s nation-building process, in those Catholic reactions against Protestantism simultaneously changed Protestants’ modes of action, and affected discourses that both sides in turn influenced each other. This reciprocal influence and dynamic led to polarization, which is the subject of the epilogue of Helgen’s study. After the 1940s, however, the religious conflicts gradually subsided. Brazil’s entry into the war alongside the USA was a reason to stop demonizing Protestantism, but also the change in church leadership played a significant role, which is why restorative positions were rejected. From the 1940s and 1950s, the church’s attention shifted more to issues of social and economic justice, which is why dogmatic and apologetic issues were more and more abandoned (p.229). The lines of conflict relaxed and, in some cases, cooperation and collaboration even occurred, as common tasks for the future were identified at times. “[r]ather than fighting against the church’s enemies, Protestantism, liberalism, and communism, Catholic Action was fighting for social equality and economic justice” (p.230). A right-wing conservative turn within the Catholic Church, through the establishment of the Secretariado Nacional de Defesa da Fé (SNDF), led to a renewed rise in anti-Protestantism and anti-Communism beginning in the 1950s again. However, the turn did not spread to the entire church but remained limited to an arch-conservative wing within the church. In the meantime, the Catholic Church itself had become diversified and divided between progressive Catholics, who later
formed as liberation theologians, and conservative integrationists that it could no longer unite under the counter-Reformation and anti-Protestant narrative (p.237). Rather, due to the global situation of the Cold War and the fear of atheistic communism, new coalitions and alliances emerged between conservative Catholics and historic Protestants who now identified Pentecostalism as a common enemy. This coincided with the second wave of Pentecostalism in Brazil, whose congregations and preachers were more confidently outward missionary, holding mass meetings in movie theaters, stadiums, and public squares (p.241). Helgen calls for nothing less than not marginalizing religious pluralism in modern historical studies of Latin America, but rather shifting it to the center of research. National discourses from politics and contemporary events cannot be understood without considering the respective positions, which in turn provoked counter-positions in the analysis.

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