

“A Light Amidst the Darkness”

**lessons from the anticlericalist struggle of the past century in Brazil for today
and its Connections with the material and antifascist struggle**

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“The criticism of religion is, therefore, the germ of the criticism of the vale of tears, of which religion is the halo.” – Karl Marx

“It is of no use to call ourselves and consider ourselves atheists; as long as we have not understood these causes.” – Mikhail Bakunin

“Methodism was the arid inner landscape of utilitarianism in an age of transition to the discipline of labor under industrial capitalism.” – Edward Thompson

“Jesus entered the temple, drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves.” – Matthew 21:12-13

In 1901, in the city of São Paulo, the first issue of the periodical *A Lanterna* was launched. Produced at Rua da Quitanda, No. 2, and released by the Anticlerical Organ of São Paulo, it was initially distributed for free, later accepting donations, and eventually offering subscriptions at varying prices. The publication consisted of four pages filled with images and illustrations, often with supplements, mostly written in Portuguese, with columns in Italian and Spanish. It was launched by a lawyer and free-thinker, Benjamin Mota, one of the central figures of the labor movement during that period. In both its first phase, until 1904, and its second, which began in 1909 under Edgard Leuenroth, a famous anarchist and syndicalist from the city, the newspaper had a circulation of between 10,000 and 15,000 copies—a figure comparable to the major press outlets. As a result, it had an extensive network of contacts, including in Minas Gerais, Santa Catarina, Pernambuco, and Paraná, and connections in Argentina, Italy, and Spain (ANDRADE, 2009). In addition to real and practical denunciations against alleged abuses by priests and members of the Catholic Church, particularly against children and women, the periodical also became a target for the authorities, while also receiving support from other major press outlets. Opposing the papacy, the newspaper brought together, as scholars of *A Lanterna* have noted, groups that sought to undermine or attack catholicism, such as freemasons and jews. By advocating for “freedom of thought” and “progress,” it could unite political factions that shared these notions, such as republicans, socialists, and anarchists (POLETTI, 2017).

Could it be that “anticlericalism [was] a specifically bourgeois distortion, consciously designed to divert the attention of the masses by organizing quasi-liberal crusades against clericalism” ,as defined in 1909 by the bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin? In this text, we will explore some aspects of the anticlerical struggle, particularly through the periodical *A Lanterna*, showing how this struggle was an important aspect not only in attacking one of the forms of domination that prevailed in Brazil at that time but also in the very construction of the labor movement and class consciousness, as well as the gathering of progressive tendencies during that period. Thus, we consider it a mistake that there was no subsequent insistence on a struggle or debate regarding the role of religions in the class struggle, in the organization of workers, and in their thoughts, including the role of religion against other faiths and the erasure of minority cultures and beliefs. Today, we live in a time of the rise and growing power of neo-Pentecostal religions that put democracy at risk and strengthen fascism, authoritarianism, and moralism. The anticlerical struggle of the past can provide us with answers and clues on how to act in response to this.

Anticlericalism and Syndicalism

Since the 18th century in Europe, the secularizing movement, which positioned the State and the emerging Republic in opposition to the influence of the Catholic Church, gained traction and influenced various demands, whether of a popular nature or within intellectual circles. Adapted by various political currents, from liberalism to republicanism and socialism, and influential in the formation of nation-states, the rejection of the papal clergy was not limited to atheists or agnostics but also circulated among freemasons and jews, who saw anticlericalism as a means to confront their historical rivals. Thus,

“they criticized the Catholic clergy, the legitimacy of the priesthood, and the wealth of the Church. They feared that the ecclesiastical institution might rise to power, reclaiming public spirit, restoring the reign of intolerance and the Inquisition. They identified the priest as a representative of an obsolete, outdated, and despicable system. For free-thinkers, catholic ministers should remain in the sacristy.” (PINHEIRO, 2003, p.47)

Within the construction of socialism, the influence of not only Anticlericalism but also atheism was evident. Mikhail Bakunin, an atheist like the socialist Karl Marx, did not disregard the freedom of personal beliefs, but he categorically advocated for “the radical abolition of all official religion and of every privileged Church, or even just protected, remunerated, and sustained by the State” (BAKUNIN, 2009, p.91), a position that highlighted differences between anarchists and other ideologies that merely aimed to eradicate the concept of belief. Nonetheless, recognizing the religious influence among workers and exploited groups, many anarchist and socialist activists also believed that mysticism itself hindered political struggle, as people were blinded by discourses that preserved the status quo of society and class domination, while also reinforcing the notion that authorities would always exist. These discourses aligned with the rationalist thoughts of the scientism of the period, which sought to discredit the concept of deities by arguing that “all religions with their gods never represent anything but the creation of the believing and credulous imagination of man, not yet elevated to the level of pure reflection and free thought supported by science.” A mixture of anticlericalism, atheism, and rationalism intertwined with the nascent labor movement and contemporary politics, circulating among republicans, freemasons, jews, and the left itself.

As historian Cleber Rudy (2017) shows, at the beginning of the century and up until the fourth decade of the 20th century, the anticlerical struggle was common in the Brazilian labor movement, with *O Lúçifer* in 1907 in Porto Alegre, *O Demolidor* in Fortaleza in 1908, *A Lanterna* (1901-1935) in São Paulo, and others. In a country marked by the influence of the Church, including politically until the Republic, but also culturally influential, it was common for these ideas circulating at the time to take root. From the beginning of its activities, *A Lanterna*, despite its critiques of mysticism itself, sought to highlight the uniquely brazilian character of catholicism, showing its connection to the economic and political domination that afflicted workers.

That is precisely why it gained the support of freemasons, jews, and spiritualists. For example, João Penteado, a teacher, anarchist, and union activist, was a spiritualist and anticlerical. Edgard Leuenroth, a union activist and anarchist member of the São Paulo Workers’ Federation, recognized this backing of the newspaper and began contributing to it. In 1909, he took over the

leadership of the periodical and added the columns "Worker's Life" and later "Worker's World" to the newspaper (SANTOS, 2014). These columns discussed the construction of unions, strikes, and news from the workers' world. Additionally, they showed readers and members the true strategy for dealing with clericalism, beyond mere discursive critique. Thus, he and other anarchists, union activists, and socialists aligned the newspaper with the Brazilian Workers' Confederation (COB), an organization that coordinated the unions of the period, and they stated that:

"It is now, more than ever, necessary to intensify and extend the actions of the COB. The COB is you, it is your unions, your associations. In you all lies the power capable of giving it the indispensable strength. And so we address this circular to you, appealing to your goodwill, to your union duty, in the sense of a methodical and energetic collaboration in the life of the COB. Work within your association, agitate your class, energize the movement in your locality, and in this way, you will effectively contribute to the smooth running of COB's activities." (A LANTERNA, 1915, p.3)

Another project of A Lanterna was to promote the creation of so-called Modern Schools, which were spaces and projects developed by socialist and anarchist militants as an alternative to state or religious education. These schools were intended for both the children of workers and older workers, where they could discuss scientific and progressive educational methods, believing that the working class should embrace science and use it to their advantage, rather than for the benefit of capitalism, the nation-state, or interests of subjugation through religions like christianity.

For Edgard Leuenroth, A Lanterna was, therefore, an initial method for engaging workers in discussions based on their lived experiences, with the Church being something that everyone was familiar with. From this debate, they could explore the causes of domination—capitalism and the rise of the nation-state, which, in their view, used religion to strengthen themselves. Leuenroth promoted revolutionary syndicalism to his readers and other writers and supporters through this theme, leveraging the existing support and development of anticlericalism but elevating it to a revolutionary position.

Anticlericalism and Antifascism

The political scientist Michael Lowy argues that "E. P. Thompson's sociological hypothesis is interesting and original. While classical Marxist literature—beginning with Marx's writings on social struggles in France between 1848 and 1850—identifies the small shopkeeper or merchant with bourgeois reaction, the English historian sees in the autonomy and independence of artisans and small traders the social basis for their antinomianism, their religious dissent, and their rebellious spirit." (LOWY, 2014, p.309). Thus, for historians of the New Left, religion could be both an element of alienation and a tool used in revolutions that embodied a class struggle within these cultures and contested them.

The anarchists involved with A Lanterna in the 1930s recognized this, especially with the rise of fascism during that period. They reactivated the periodical, alongside other emerging anticlerical leagues, holding a dominant position in the newspaper at that time. Despite their atheist discussions, they initially sought to form alliances with minority religions, such as spiritualists,

demonstrating that the fascist project tended to be totalitarian regarding personal beliefs and was in harmony with catholicism. They even showed christians that true christianity had nothing to do with domination:

“Anyone who knows something of the history of religions and is able to confront the facts will find that the Church has never had any relation or similarity to the doctrine of a poor galilean carpenter, who is said to have been born in a stable, whose first acts of life were characterized by complete renunciation of wealth, by a rebellious action against dogma, an aversion to power and rulers, and, above all, by a high concept of universal brotherhood. The influence of Catholicism in the history of humanity is precisely the antithesis of christianity.” (A Lanterna, 1934, p.1)

To create a social force in this sense, anarchists sought to combine anticlericalism with antifascism, showing the connection between the two movements. Although fascism in Italy initially presented itself as rationalist and secular, in 1929 it signed a concordat with the Vatican. Similarly, A Lanterna wrote in 1935, before the intense state repression that would follow, “the revolution, we will say, reactionary, [...] to worsen this situation further, the national assembly, perhaps obeying Rome’s injunctions, is deciding the national security law.” The same was true in the fight against the integralists, where they argued that “integralism and clericalism are the same thing, that is, the most harmful of regimes.”

This activity of A Lanterna followed the efforts of other prominent and influential libertarian activists and intellectuals, such as Maria Lacerda de Moura, who published in 1933 the works *Clero e Fascismo: Horda de Embrutecedores* and *Fascismo – Filho Dileto da Igreja e do Capital*, where the author argued that “capitalism uses the doctrines of renunciation and passive resignation of the Church to extend its octopus-like tentacles over the working masses” and “the Church uses capitalism to arm the secular arm of the State against heresy.” (MOURA, 2012, p.18).

Attempting to mobilize various groups simultaneously against fascism, state corporatism, integralism, and clericalism—since they were interconnected in this view—the anarchists demonstrated that their anticlericalist program was, in reality, against any form of domination, which they called “integral anticlericalism,” defined as:

“[...] against the Church as a political, economic, and religious power, as a material and spiritual force, as a supporter of tyrants and a defender of privileges, as an obstacle to social emancipation. We do not want to consolidate any privilege or defend the ‘supremacy’ of any power. We are for all freedoms, against all oppressions.” (A Lanterna, 1933, p.1).

But what’s most interesting is that despite their radical positions—such as anarchists and socialists who did not believe in the possibility of a democratic constitution—these groups participated in campaigns for a secular Brazil and the end of religious influence in public spaces, proposals also supported by Freemasons and moderate Republicans. This happened during the discussion of a new Brazilian Constitution when various Pro-Secular State associations were formed, creating the National Coalition for the Secular State based in Rio de Janeiro, which included many Freemasons but also many libertarians. They advocated for secular education in schools, the defense of divorce, the separation of Church and State, and other issues. It is quite intriguing that anarchists, through A Lanterna, published in 1933 the defense of:

”A Constitution that rises above the conflicting particular interests, keeping public powers equidistant from all churches, cults, and doctrines; a Constitution that enshrines freedom and equality of religions, secular education in public schools, freedom of thought, assembly, and association, and the absolute secularity of the State, with the prohibition of official religious practices or the placement of images or symbols of any cult in public institutions.” (A Lanterna, 1933, p.1).

Final Considerations

Should we consider the fight against religious influence in politics a thing of the past? Should we simply declare atheism without discussing what religion means for workers? The anticlerical struggle, though minority in the last century and largely abandoned by the left, shows signs that such a discussion was necessary. The abandonment of this project, and obviously the withdrawal of the left from grassroots movements, has deepened the poor’s adherence to ideas they believe can save them from their conditions, leading them to embrace and follow these programs in a totalitarian way, intertwining with politics, society, and laws. The rise of neo-Pentecostal churches, which actually emerged to counter the influence of progressive grassroots ecclesiastical communities of the Catholic Church that the Workers’ Party (PT) used to solidify its hegemony, was neither blocked nor seriously discussed at its inception.

Thus, we need discussions about african and indigenous religions and other threatened beliefs, as well as debates on sexuality, science, and education to take place in work environments, connecting to a material trade union struggle and antifascist organizations. As in the past, pastors and entities that thrive on workers’ money must be treated as the foundation of fascism and an alienation from capital, while respecting, of course, their personal beliefs and traditions. Obviously, this should be done gradually, through the struggle and exercise of economic demands or in social movements that defend them and replace what these religions claim to be doing—standing by the poor and offering hope, whether they want it or not.

At the same time, a united progressive front must fight for the secularity of public spaces. Clearly, we ultimately want a revolution that ends this influence and allows everyone to believe in whatever they wish in their homes, but we must build the possibilities for this revolution. Therefore, far from being a “petty bourgeois” debate, gradual secular struggles build the potential for a new world, where religious influence with political power—or any other form of domination—has disappeared.

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