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Louis Edgar Esparza
California State University – Los Angeles, lesparz5@calstatela.edu

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Peace Bishops: Lessons from Dom Hélder Câmara in Brazil: Inquiry, teaching, and aesthetics

Louis Edgar Esparza
California State University – Los Angeles
lesparz5@calstatela.edu

This essay explains how Dom Hélder Câmara, archbishop of Olinda and Recife, used the traditions of critical inquiry, Catholic social teaching, and cultural aesthetics to advocate for the poor in the northeast of Brazil during the military dictatorship of 1964-1985. It details the adversity that Câmara and others in his position faced, providing some historical context for those events. Drawing from social movement and theological sources, the article then proceeds to highlight critical inquiry, Catholic social teaching, and cultural aesthetics as driving forces in Câmara's work.

Keywords: liberation theology; social movements; Brazil; Hélder Câmara; civil disobedience

Introduction

Three seraphim suspend above the nave in Oscar Niemeyer's Cathedral de Brasília. As guardians of the Brazilian public, we may think of these angels as symbolic of salvific expression. The Cathedral seems to have been initially intended for ecumenical worship. (Grajales, 2018, pp. 22-26) But as Dom Hélder Câmara tells us, "We are responsible for being brother or sister to all people without stopping to consider whether we're dealing with Catholics or Christians or believers. Enough for us to know that every human creature is our brother or our sister, the child of the same Father." (Câmara, 2009, p. 51)

Let these three angels also symbolize Brazil's strong tradition of cultural aesthetics, critical inquiry, and Catholic social teaching. Câmara deploys all three in the face of mortal adversity. Dom Hélder Câmara is, according to Ivanir Antonio Rampon (2013, p. 13), one of the most important personalities of the twentieth century in Brazil. Câmara is currently a candidate for sainthood in the Catholic Church as a Servant of God. Câmara's work in the slums of northeastern Brazil benefited thousands of people in his archdiocese. Dire poverty revolted Câmara, finding it degrading of human dignity, writing that poverty "taints the image of God in every man." (Câmara, 2009, p. 66) He would organize what he called "Abrahamic minorities" of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and anyone else opposing poverty to intervene in social injustices.

Câmara in Context

A 1916 pastoral letter from Archbishop Sebastião Leme lead to a church-state agreement in Brazil. This "neo-Christendom" faced 19th century challenges stemming from the introduction of Protestantism and the influence of freemasonry among elites. (Borges, 2016) With the introduction of the behavioral sciences to Brazil, a young Hélder Câmara joined conservative Church authorities in opposing *behaviorismo* as "heretical and materialist." (Rampon, 2013, p. 44) A few rogue abolitionist priests protested slavery. But most of the Church kept slaves until the practice became illegal in 1888, (Borges, 2016) although there was "no coherent body of Church doctrine or ecclesiastical statute that regulated slavery." (Schwartz, 1974, p. 610) A few years later, Pope Leo (1891) published the encyclical text that would become the foundation of Catholic social

teaching and, later, liberation theology. Câmara endorses those rogues writing, "We Christians imported slaves from Africa. They were brought here under appalling conditions. Even cattle were not transported like that." (Câmara, 2009, p. 138) The British dominated much of the 19th and early 20th century Brazilian economy. Especially through the control of banking, imports, and exports, the British maintained their dominance over local outfits in the northeast. This activity depressed local economic development while the southern state of São Paulo, for example, skyrocketed. (Davis, 2001, pp. 378-381)

Once a fascist, the Spring of 1964 coup d'état changed things for Dom Hélder Câmara. The Brazilian army had overthrown their democratic civilian government. Rebelling against elitist forces, but also against himself, the cleric began to express his vision of Catholic social teaching from radical (and radically divergent) ideological positions. The military branded Câmara the "Red Bishop," even though Câmara had associated himself with the conservative "Integralist" movement in the decades prior. Integralism was a political movement influenced by French *intégrisme* after the Dryfus affair, and was hostile to both the "alleged financial empire of International Jewry" and "Jewish bolshevism" which enjoyed the support of the Brazilian Catholic Church. (Levine, 1968, p. 50) Antisemitism was at the core of integralist mobilization in their support for the Vichy government. (Joly, 2012, p. 110; Tannenbaum, 1961) Elazar-DeMota (2015, pp. 9-10) points out that even liberation theology's interpretations of religious texts sometimes excluded Latin America's Jewish communities. While Câmara would later redeem himself by tying together Christians, Jews, and Muslims as "Abrahamic minorities," at this time, Câmara was a prominent leader of the Integralist movement in the state of Pernambuco. (Gonçalves & Caldeira Neto, 2022, p. 7)

The perniciousness of this "context," as McDonagh (Câmara, 2009) puts it, makes Câmara's later ideas all the more compelling. He is forced out of the Integralist movement by the cardinal who had inspired his joining it in the first place. Câmara is then reborn as one of the most important peace bishops of the Americas. He leaps into Latin American politics as the auxiliary bishop of Rio de Janeiro after earlier being denied the position. As Archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Câmara would become a well-known advocate of the poor. Despite himself, Câmara could not ignore the poverty in his midst. This failure to ignore the ignobility of poverty would turn out to be dangerous for Câmara and other clerics. The slain Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, explained the problem thusly, "This defense of the poor in a world deep in conflict, has occasioned something new in the recent history of our church: persecution." (Ellsberg, 2008, p. 70) Both Romero and Câmara saw their colleagues and friends fall to political violence. Câmara conducted this work at a time when Brazil was overrun by a military dictatorship. The cleric survived an assassination attempt, had his offices ransacked, and his house was sprayed with gunfire. (Ellsberg, 2008, p. 120) The full history of repression during this period has not been integrated into the Brazilian aesthetic. As a result, "state violence repeats itself largely due to a failure to recognize violent practices as human rights norms violations." (Fecher & Costa, 2020, p. 22) As far as contemporary cultural markers that acknowledge this history, "there are few places linked to repression and human rights violations considered cultural heritage in Brazil." (Campos & Neves, 2023, p. 35) The death and disease endemic to the region became a cultural feature. But so did the "disappearances, tortures, and deaths of suspected subversives." (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 223)

Until the dictatorship, Câmara had supported a network of semi-autonomous youth and labor movements. (Mische, 2008, p. 117) Clerical youth and labor movement structures in the northeast survived the coming repression. But the military would not spare the communists. (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 542) Câmara's opposition to poverty stood on metaphysical ground, writing, "a poverty so degrading and a wealth so irresponsible are in blatant contrast to all the precepts of the Scriptures." (Moosbrugger et al., 1972, p. 42) Sociologically, we can think of this metaphysical motivation as stemming from an altruistic supraconsciousness. (Sorokin, 2002 [1964], p. 83) Liberation theologians point to the legislation outlined in Leviticus and Deuteronomy against the exploitation of accumulated wealth. (Gutiérrez, 2020 [1971], p. 167) Either way, Câmara was banned from speaking in public for more than ten years and the military forbade the newspapers from printing his name. (Ellsberg, 2008, p. 120) The faith that Câmara expressed, both in content and actual practice, was, in effect, opposite from any practiced by the military. He was reclaiming the God found in the Scriptures[i] from the disgrace of what it had become. (Nelson-Pallmeyer, 2001, p. x)

The only thing that kept Câmara out of prison was his wild popularity with the people. Like the embeddedness of priests of the Vendée within counterrevolutionary groups against the violence of the French revolution (Tilly, 1964, p. 9), Câmara had long embedded himself in and was responsible for Christian Action and other popular organizations. Most bishops had a traditional command-and-control relationship with their parishes. But Câmara's leadership style appeared to be *catalytic* (Esparza, 2023b, pp. 122-123), galvanizing a popular energy that was already present. This decentralized style manifests itself in Catholic social thought as the principle of *subsidiary*, which offers relative autonomy to local groups. (Frezzo, 2015, p. 142)

Câmara surprised his international observers by dressing below his office and living in spartan accommodations. (Broucker, 1970, pp. 101-102) His popularity abroad put him in contact with Daniel Berrigan, (Martin, 2017, p. 559) but Câmara was also long embedded in international Catholic networks. This continued even after the military expelled most of the foreign clergy in 1964. (Zirker, 1999) International non-violent movements wanted Câmara to lead an international coalition. He refused them, writing "It isn't a leader that we lack. […] only the Holy Spirit can make [Abrahamic minorities] effective." (Câmara, 2009, p. 86) Their nonviolence made Catholics among the largest transnational movement groups in the Americas. (Pagnucco & McCarthy, 1999, p. 236) Religious groups are often a force multiplier for dissent in the Americas and Eastern Europe (Zald, 1982) as well as in Western Europe and Australia. (Nepstad, 2008)

Is Câmara a saint?

Candidates for sainthood, as Câmara now is, are often the subject of rococo hagiographies and several texts depict Câmara in this light. (c.f. Broucker, 1970; Condini, 2014; Ellsberg, 2008; Piletti & Praxedes, 2008) But McDonagh (Câmara, 2009) and Rampon (2013) treat Câmara in a more balanced manner. In a substantive introduction, McDonagh (Câmara, 2009) reveals the cleric to be an Aristotelian political animal battered by Greek Fates. As Câmara's ideas exist in the imagination of the Catholic Left, McDonagh compresses them into a precious gemstone, glimmering with Câmara's non-fiction broadsides mixed together with naturalistic canticles. This is the Câmara in focus here. Less flattering is the Câmara depicted by Brazilian playwright Nelson Rodrigues. (1995) A collection of Rodrigues' columns published in *O Globo*, Brazil's major newspaper, contains some two dozen essays lampooning Câmara as an equivocating media

darling. Taken together, these differing texts inform a Câmara that is as cunning and complex as he is righteous.

The Catholic Left has many heroes: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, Sophie Scholl, Leo Tolstoy. Dom Hélder Câmara's life ranks at least with these as a major force of the twentieth century Catholic Left. Once Pope Paul VI appointed Câmara archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Câmara labored to improve the material conditions of the people of northeastern Brazil. Appearing for the first time before his impoverished archdiocese, and just weeks after the Brazilian Army seized authority over the country's affairs, Câmara tells his flock: "I have not come to help anyone to delude themselves by thinking that all we need is a little generosity and social work. Of course, there are cases of shocking poverty to which we have no right to remain indifferent." (2009, p. 40) Câmara's (2016) media depictions of orphans and rats in the streets of Recife rivals the media work of Mother Cabrini in New York some decades earlier. (DiGiovanni, 1991)

Câmara's task was formidable. With Soviet-influenced communist revolution and US-influenced military dictatorship sweeping the continent, Câmara saw that for the Church to remain relevant, she would have to abandon her usual policy of siding with the privileged classes. Câmara dreamed that the Brazilian dictatorship would collapse on its own. (Comblin, 2014) But his battle would prove to be a more difficult one. Câmara would make a series of interventions against violence, cautioning, "we have to be very careful that in bringing about the advancement of the oppressed we don't encourage them to imitate the only kind of advancement they have ever seen – to follow the example set by their oppressors." (2009, p. 44)

Remaining consistent on behalf of Brazil's poor over the next 35 years, Câmara became a household name in Brazil. Câmara understood where the impulse for communism was coming from, repeating in speeches around the world in 1968, "the memory of Camilo Torres and Che Guevara deserves as much respect as that of Dr. Martin Luther King. I accuse the real abettors of violence, all those on the right or on the left who wrong justice and prevent peace." (Câmara, 2009, p. 81) But it is also clear that Câmara stands against revolutionary violence. In the context of the liberation theology of the Medellín conference (The Bishops of Latin America, 1968), Câmara made a point to "distinguish communism and communalism, the latter being controlled by the free conscious of the individual." (Elazar-DeMota, 2015, p. 9) Câmara (1975, p. 15) recognized that both "capitalism and socialism are capable to practice expansive crimes against humanity." He reminded these audiences that "[o]pting for nonviolence means to believe more strongly in the power of truth, justice, and love than in the power of wars, weapons, and hatred." (Câmara, 2009, p. 81) Câmara's (1974, p. 117) poem, "Do not fear the truth," published in a small book of the archbishop's poems by Orbis, continues,

> hard as it may appear,
> grievously as it may hurt,
> it is still right
> and you were born for it.

Daniel Berrigan of the Catonsville Nine was born for it. The Jesuits exiled Berrigan to Latin America after the Catonsville Nine kicked off a wave of break-ins into draft board offices across

the United States during the Vietnam War. This ethos is at the center of the Catholic Left which often rejects modernity on metaphysical grounds. Câmara and Berrigan met in Brazil, during Berrigan's exile.

But being "born for it" is also part of Câmara's inventory of prescriptions for developing a good personal character. Critiquing holier-than-thouism among certain Catholics, Câmara (2009, p. 52) writes "Once we human creatures become convinced we cannot fall, we soon find we can't understand other people's weaknesses anymore."

Having spent time working in Brazil's poor people's movements, Câmara (2009, p. 55) has a lot to say about the debates in social movement theory about the efficacy of centralized and decentralized organizational forms: "People will always argue the respective merits of 'horizontalism' and 'verticalism,'" Câmara says. He is "certain the Lord doesn't see these as separate, still less as mutually opposed. […] neither the horizontal line alone, nor the vertical line alone, can form a cross. The horizontal line is the arms of Christ spread wide to all humanity's huge problems." (Câmara, 2009, p. 56)

Câmara hides his hand about so-called "verticalism" here, but elsewhere he says "Don't think that the government is going to come here and solve your problems for you! You've got to think for yourselves, act for yourselves. Later perhaps, when the government sees you all united, it may come and help." (Câmara, 2009, p. 61) And later, "[w]e have no right to blame God for injustice and its attendant evils; it is for us to do away with injustice." (Câmara, 2009, p. 66)

Even Moses failed in preventing his flock from blaming God for their problems – what hope does Câmara have? Câmara's main point is to keep with the Law and to do the work gladly. He is not alone in taking the Beatitudes seriously enough to take a forcefully non-violent position. The *Rerum Novarum*, on the rights and duties of capital and labor, for instance, drives the Church to intervene in economic inequality. (Leo XIII, 1891) Gandhi also relies on radical truth-telling. Satyagraha or "truth force," is at the heart of Gandhi's (1962) philosophy of non-violence that drove the engine of 20th century non-violent movements.

Câmara calls grassroots activists for change "Abrahamic minorities," which include "all those who over the centuries have continued to hope against hope." (Câmara, 2009, p. 86) The term implies an ecumenical understanding of the covenant to include activist Jews and Muslims. This idea is, no doubt, controversial among some Catholics. His motives seem to be rooted in finding grassroots solutions to institutional corruption: "although I now realize that it is virtually useless to appeal to institutions as such, everywhere I go, I find [Abrahamic] minorities with the power for love and justice that could be likened to nuclear energy locked for millions of years in the smallest atoms and waiting to be released." (Câmara, 2009, p. 92) Câmara (1971b, p. 70) uses the term to refer to small, Christian communities, but also encourages the birth of other Abrahamic minorities in towns and countries around the world. Indeed, the use of "Abrahamic minorities" is more inclusive than that of "Judeo-Christian." Perhaps Câmara was thinking of Jesus' command: "If you be the children of Abraham, do the works of Abraham." (St John 8:39 DRC) In the end, Câmara does believe that the Church can be redeemed. In his poem "So you think that," Câmara (2009, p. 110) writes:

> The worse his church and ours
> is marred by our failures,
> the steadier he will support her
> with his tender care.

Remarkably current, Câmara's warnings to Africa and Asia about the dangers of neo-colonialism turn out to come true: "In Latin America, for the last century and a half, we have experienced political independence without economic independence. So we are well placed to warn our brothers and sisters in Africa and Asia: 'Look out! Those nations that are too powerful, the United States, Russia, China, are bound to have ulterior motives. They help out, but in giving, impose their influence. Colonialism will be reborn, brothers. In a different form, but it will be colonialism just the same." (Câmara, 2009, pp. 161-162)

As we, too, face many of these same problems, Câmara's example becomes an important guide to contextualize contemporary efforts. Take it also as an invitation to fold the lessons of Brazil's social movements into canon. Câmara acts as a light with which we can see what has sometimes been obscure. With the guide of this luminary, we may turn the priorities of the City of Man upside-down.

Aesthetics, Inquiry, & Teaching

Despite himself,[ii] Câmara could not ignore the poverty in his midst. This failure to ignore the ignobility of deprivation would turn out to be dangerous for many clerics. The slain Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Romero, explained the problem thusly, "This defense of the poor in a world deep in conflict, has occasioned something new in the recent history of our church: persecution." (Ellsberg, 2008, p. 70) Both Romero and Câmara saw their colleagues and friends fall to political violence. Câmara's aesthetics share similarities with that of Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua. This is especially so when compared to some of the irrepressible euphoria of Cardenal's early work. Speaking of the metaphysical basis for human dignity, Cardenal (1972, pp. 145-146) writes,

> even the most inferior of men is greater than the entire material universe; he has a greatness of a different order, which surpasses any mere quantitative greatness.

This aesthetic is at the center of the Catholic Left, which often rejects modernity on metaphysical rather than materialist grounds. Câmara was popular with the Catholic Left all over the world. When Daniel Berrigan met with Câmara, it was only after the Jesuits had exiled Berrigan to Latin America after he and the Catonsville Nine kicked off a wave of break-ins into draft board offices across the United States. (Glick, 2020; Martin, 2017, p. 559; Nepstad, 2008)

Câmara openly embraced the international Catholic Left aesthetic, but also the domestic humanistic expression of arts and culture in the Lusophone world. But this favor was not always returned. The Brazilian playwright Nelson Rodrigues (1995) invented an "imaginary interview" for his newspaper audience. Rodrigues doubts that the archbishop even believes in God. He asks about Câmara's thoughts on eternal life. "Eternal life never filled anyone's belly," Rodriques' imaginary Câmara replies. Though Rodrigues' attacks were seldom substantive, these attacks did reflect a real backlash present among the Brazilian elite.

These kinds of critiques were also sometimes based in the reaction against the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, some of which Câmara is said to have played a role.[iii] But it is hard to ignore the sharp edges of critical inquiry posed by oppositional movements. Camilo Torres (1969, p. 124), the Colombian sociologist, priest, and revolutionary, saw in the Brazilian *coup d'état* a determined and capable elite against an only moderately oppositional public. Torres would die in battle against the Colombian state. The role of opposition to injustice also comes up in the first leaflet of the White Rose under Nazi Germany: "Nothing is so unworthy of a civilized nation as to allow itself to be 'governed' without any opposition by an irresponsible clique that has yielded to basest instincts." (Dumbach & Newborn, 2013 [1986], p. 186) The young students authoring and distributing this text also met their death at the hands of the state. Primo Levi wrote that he and his fellow captives in the Monowitz concentration camp "are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last – the power to refuse our consent." (Levi, 1996 [1958], p. 41) Even the Victorian French Romantic priest Lamennais asserts coordinated refusal when writing, "If, therefore, some man cometh and sayeth: Ye are mine; answer, No, we belong to God, who is our Father, and to Christ, who is our only Master." (Lamennais, as cited in Halsted, 1967, p. 172)

Coordinated refusal is a mainstay of the critical inquiry of the Catholic and secular Lefts. Rejecting reformism, Henry David Thoreau reminds us in *Civil Disobedience*, "[a]s for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways." (1999 [1849], p. 274) Tying this same idea to the Sin encapsulated in the state, the abolitionist Adin Ballou asked the poignant question, "Why is it that one man, ten, a hundred, may not break the law of God, but a great number may?" (as cited in Tolstoy, 2011 [1894], p. 6) Societies sometimes become indignant when corrupt elites dole out one lie after the other. (Esparza, 2023a) Peter Maurin wrote of the treason of intellectuals almost one hundred years ago in *The Catholic Worker*: "By sponsoring nationalism and capitalism, modern liberals have given up the search for truth and have become paid propagandists." (2020 [1933], p. 32) When thinking about why people cannot find the courage to face the truth or to take the moral high ground, Câmara writes, "there's much more weakness than malignancy." (Câmara, 2009, p. 151)

Câmara's seeming endorsement of Camillo Torres, Che Guevara, Dr. King and other controversial figures of the Catholic, Christian, and secular Lefts drew its share of controversy. These were exactly the kinds of statements that drew Nelson Rodrigues (1995, p. 66) to question Câmara's commitment to non-violence, lamenting, "and why, my God, why do I see Catholics justifying guerilla war, thinking that guerilla war is a noble activity?" But Câmara (1971b, pp. 30-37) argues not only that "violence attracts violence," but also that it invites the state to repress people.[iv] But the pedagogical component of Catholic social teaching would also be important to Câmara. Teaching is important to him because

> a mass of people is not the same as a united people. A mass only becomes a united people after a long and difficult campaign during which people are gradually and quietly made more aware. (Câmara, 2009, p. 83)

It was through Catholic Action and other anti-poverty work that Câmara saw that changes in personal behavior took place. The sociologist-priest Alceu Amoroso Lima, who once chaired

Catholic Action, had decades-long influence on Câmara. (Lima & Moraes, 2017) Speaking of efforts to free the poor from the habits of poverty Câmara writes,

> Much needs to be done if we are ever to change the begging syndrome without pushing the poor into hating us, for this would only be to encourage the oppressed of today to become the oppressors of tomorrow. (Câmara, 2009, p. 161)

This is a brave approach and is easily misinterpreted. It damns the condition of poverty while also demanding responsibility from the person in the condition of poverty. Câmara defended the rights of workers, and especially those of the sugarcane workers who populated the northeast of Brazil. (Câmara, 2016[1979]) As people lead holier lives, the Church also becomes holier. This process operates under a "metaphysic of interdependence" (Barron, 1998, p. 49) that rewards devotion with spiritual gifts. Organizing Catholics against the Church's recent sexual abuse crisis, Bishop Barron similarly writes,

> Fight by raising your voice in protest; fight by writing a letter of complaint; fight by insisting that protocols be followed; fight by reporting offenders; fight by pursuing the guilty until they are punished; fight by refusing to be mollified by pathetic excuses. But above all, fight by your very holiness of life; fight by becoming the saint that God wants you to be[.] (Barron, 2019, pp. 101-102)

For individuals to "fight," we must abandon fear and "begin to live in radical trust." (Barron, 1998, p. 5) To this Catholic pedagogy Câmara adds fighting through Catholic social action and fighting with the aesthetic of the international Catholic Left.

Conclusion

These three ideas of critical inquiry, Catholic social teaching, and cultural aesthetics are salient features of liberation for Dom Hélder Câmara, archbishop of Olinda and Recife. But they are also three strategies that we may borrow from Brazilian social movements. Especially effective in poverty alleviation under the military dictatorship of 1964-1985, these lessons can be applied elsewhere to reach hardened hearts. "[W]e must not forget," Câmara (1971a, p. 23) reminds us, "that technocrats at the apogee of technology also have need of religion."

The three angels floating above Brasília bring three glorious gifts. They defend the wisdom of Beatitudes and against her enemies. But it is up to humanity to assert our own dignity. We do so by walking in Dom Hélder Câmara's footsteps, as we remember his decades-long commitment to the working poor of northeastern Brazil. We do so also by embracing a pluralistic Abrahamic tradition that builds affection and peace.

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Endnotes

[i] As difficult as it has turned out to be to assert Biblical authority in theological and historical debates, Christians turn to the Bible for, at least, useful and sound principles. Nickle, K. F. (1980). *The Synoptic Gospels : conflict and consensus*. John Knox Press.

[ii] Câmara had previously spearheaded reactionary groups. This is not entirely unique as Oscar Romero and Simone de Beauvoir also both abandoned their reactionary ideas before becoming permanent fixtures of the Left.

[iii] Especially in the drafting of the controversial pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*.

[iv] The social movements literature has largely proven Câmara to be correct. (Esparza, 2023, pp. 31-44; Sharp, 1973)