

1-2007

A Tale of Two Priests and Two Struggles: Liberation Theology from Dictatorship to Democracy in the Brazilian Northeast

Jan Hoffman French

University of Richmond, jfrench@richmond.eduFollow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/socanth-faculty-publications> Part of the [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

French, Jan Hoffman. "A Tale of Two Priests and Two Struggles: Liberation Theology from Dictatorship to Democracy in the Brazilian Northeast." *The Americas* 63, no. 3 (January 2007): 409-43.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology and Anthropology at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology and Anthropology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

A TALE OF TWO PRIESTS AND TWO STRUGGLES: LIBERATION THEOLOGY FROM DICTATORSHIP TO DEMOCRACY IN THE BRAZILIAN NORTHEAST

INTRODUCTION

Land for the landless, food for the hungry, literacy for the uneducated—not through charitable works, but by forcing the state to take seriously its responsibilities to its poorest citizens. This was integral to the theology of liberation as it was practiced by bishops, priests, and nuns in Brazil beginning shortly after the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. Important sectors of the Brazilian Catholic Church were “opting for the poor”¹ at a time when economic development, modernization, and democracy were not considered appropriate or meaningful partners in the repressive environment characterized by the Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985).

The development of liberation theology as a social movement in Latin America is generally attributed to a “convergence of changes within and without the Church in the late 1950s,” a “complex evolution of links between religious and political cultures, in a context of modernization and intense social and political conflict.”² Internally, new theological currents inspired by European experiences during World War II culminated in the pontificate of John XXIII (1958-63) and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), which began to systematize new concerns with inequalities and social justice that were already afoot. These Church concerns coincided with events in Latin America that began with intensive industrialization and the concomitant dependence on the northern hemisphere during the 1950s. Reaching a head with the Cuban Revolution in 1959, social struggles took

¹ Madeleine Adriance, *Opting for the Poor: Brazilian Catholicism in Transition* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1986).

² Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London; New York: Verso, 1996), pp. 40, 2.

off in the rest of Latin America. These were some of the conditions that made possible the “radicalization of Latin American Catholic culture”³ which led to liberation theology described by Phillip Berryman as “one manifestation of a worldwide movement for emancipation”; “an interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor; a critique of society and the ideologies sustaining it; a critique of the activity of the church and of Christians from the angle of the poor.”⁴

Liberation theology teaches that “[p]eople do not simply happen to be poor; their poverty is largely a product of the way society is organized . . . it is [therefore] a critique of economic structures that enable some Latin Americans to jet to Miami or London to shop, while most of their fellow citizens do not have safe drinking water.”⁵ Of all the countries in Latin America, including Peru from which the first treatise on liberation theology emanated,⁶ Brazil is most associated with the doctrine, “the only Church on the continent where liberation theology and its pastoral followers . . . won a decisive influence.”⁷ That influence grew rapidly in opposition to the military government beginning in 1968 with the hardening of the dictatorship’s position against “subversives.” In fact, during that period the “Brazilian Church was practically the only effective space of liberty . . . the voice of the voiceless.”⁸ Moreover, liberation theology played a critical role in the Church’s changing attitudes toward indigenous rights and land struggles, and served as the catalyzing force behind the creative use of law to advance those goals.⁹

This article examines two successful struggles in the semi-arid backlands of the northeastern region of Brazil that were shaped by, and helped define,

³ Löwy, *The War of Gods*, p. 41

⁴ Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology: The Essential Facts About the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America and Beyond* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), pp. 5, 6. For a succinct discussion of the history and status of liberation theology, see Claudio de Oliveira Ribeiro, “Has Liberation Theology Died? Reflections on the Relationship between Community Life and the Globalization of the Economic System,” *The Ecumenical Review* 51:3 (July 1999), pp. 304-14.

⁵ Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, p. 5.

⁶ Gustavo Gutierrez, *Teologia da Libertação* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1975 [1971 in Spanish]).

⁷ Löwy, *The War of Gods*, p. 81.

⁸ Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza, “Roman Catholic Church and the Experience of Democracy in Latin America,” Paper presented at the conference on Contemporary Catholicism, Religious Pluralism, and Democracy in Latin America: Challenges, Responses, and Impact, Kellogg Institute for International Studies, University of Notre Dame, March 31-April 1, 2005, p. 7.

⁹ For a specific treatment of this issue, see Jan Hoffman French, “Dancing for Land: Law-Making and Cultural Performance in Northeastern Brazil,” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review (PoLAR)* 25:1 (May 2002), pp. 19-36; Jan Hoffman French, “The Rewards of Resistance: Legalizing Identity among Descendants of *Índios* and Fugitive Slaves in Northeastern Brazil” (Ph.D., Duke University, 2003).

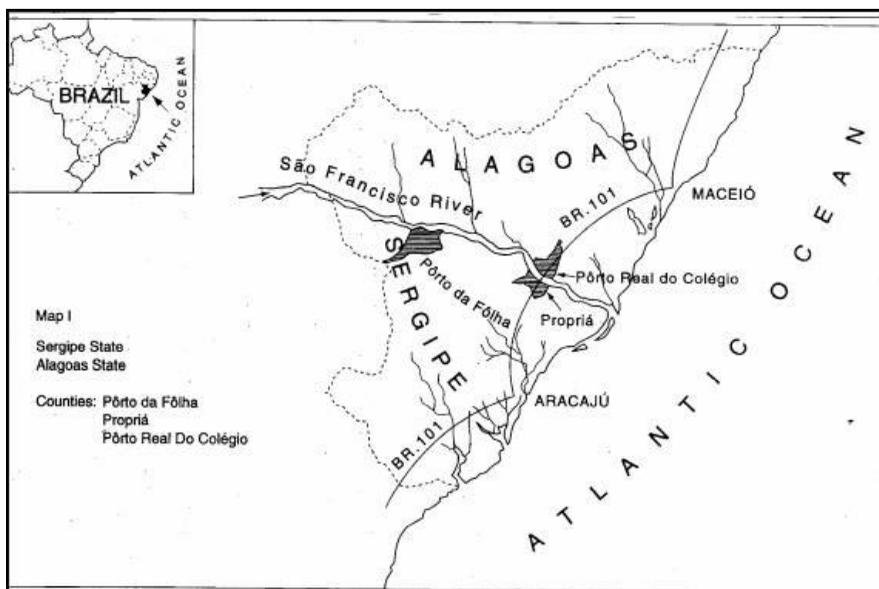


Figure 1: Map showing Sergipe and Alagoas with the São Francisco River (see inset for placement within Brazil)

Source: Mota, Clarice Novaes da. *Jurema's Children in the Forest of Spirits: Healing and Ritual among Two Brazilian Indigenous Groups*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997.

two generations of pastoral agents inspired by liberation theology. Two decades apart, the struggles were conducted on the banks of the São Francisco River in Sergipe, the smallest state of Brazil (see figures 1 and 2), in the county of Porto da Folha, which constitutes a significant portion of the Catholic diocese of Propriá (see figure 3).¹⁰ The first was a movement for

¹⁰ In 1960, the diocese of Aracaju, Sergipe, was divided into three dioceses—Aracaju, Propriá, and Estância. In 2002, 97.85% of the population of the Estância diocese was Catholic (5th in the nation); while Propriá was 96.78% Catholic (12th). The percentage of Catholics in the Propriá diocese has gone down less than 1% since 1966. Aracaju has fallen from 97% in 1976 to 76.8% in 2002 (www.catholic-hierarchy.org, accessed May 21, 2005), a trend that is repeated in major urban centers around the country, i.e. Rio (54%), Recife (62%), and São Paulo (68%) according to the 2000 census. See Cesar Romero Jacob, Dora Rodrigues Hees, Philippe Waniez, and Violette Brustlein, *Atlas da Filiação Religiosa E Indicadores Sociais No Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro; São Paulo: Editora PUC-Rio; Loyola; CNBB, 2003). In fact, the São Francisco River valley that runs through the Propriá diocese, then through Bahia and into Minas Gerais is known for its continuing loyalty to Catholicism, with percentages of Catholics remaining in the nineties (Jacob et al., *Atlas*, p. 15). It is significant that although Church growth is slower than the growth of the overall Brazilian population (over 170 million), 125.5 million people declared themselves to be Catholic in 2000, the largest number of Catholics in a single country. As of 2005, estimates have increased to over 151 million Brazilian Catholics (BBC News In Depth, April 1, 2005, http://newswww.bbc.net.uk/2/low/in_depth/4243727.stm, accessed June 25, 2005).

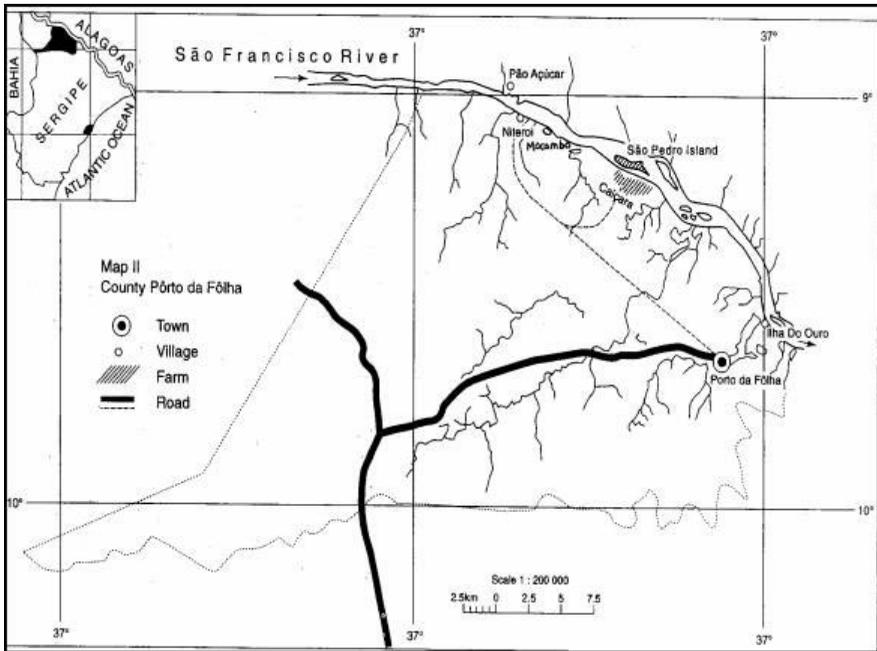


Figure 2: Map showing São Pedro Island and Mocambo

Source: Mota, Clarice Novaes da. *Jurema's Children in the Forest of Spirits: Healing and Ritual among Two Brazilian Indigenous Groups*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997.

recognition and land by a group of rural workers who were to become the Xocó indigenous tribe in the wake of the formation of the Indigenist Missionary Council (CIMI—Conselho Indigenista Missionário) and the implementation of the Indian Statute of 1973. The second involved Mocambo—a neighboring and related community of sharecroppers who gained recognition and land as a *quilombo* (descendant of fugitive slave) community in the late 1990s under a provision of the 1988 Constitution. In each case, a priest provided the catalyzing force.

Although the two priests became political rivals, their trajectories within the diocese of Propriá represent two generations of priests who were oriented, and decisively shaped, by the doctrine and practice of liberation theology. I use the stories of these two struggles, so closely tied to the Catholic Church and its pastoral agents, to explore what is meant by the uncontested assertion that the Brazilian Church became more conservative in the transition from dictatorship to democracy and the concomitant prevailing view that liberation theology is defunct. The goal is to problematize the notion of

the “Church” as a homogeneous institution and to historicize our understanding of liberation theology and “liberationist thought.”¹¹ I propose that liberation theology should be seen as a “flexible”¹² project implemented by successive generations of priests, nuns, and bishops.

The guiding argument of this article, therefore, is that in spite of a “Catholic restoration” movement instigated and carried out by Pope John Paul II¹³ with the assistance of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, there continue to be parishes and dioceses, particularly in rural Brazil, where Catholicism remains strong,¹⁴ dedicated to promoting the values of liberation theology. In that regard, at the conclusion of sociologist Madeleine Cousineau Adriance’s ethnographically-based study of six rural communities in northern Brazil in which she provides evidence of Church inspired rural land struggle, she admonishes that “researchers who study the progressive Catholic Church in Latin America may need to pay closer attention to what is going on in rural areas.”¹⁵ In my ethnographic fieldwork and the history of backland northeastern communities, a portion of which I

¹¹ Goetz Frank Ottmann, *Lost for Words? Brazilian Liberationism in the 1990s* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), p. 15.

¹² Daniel Levine, “Review Essay: On Premature Reports of the Death of Liberation Theology,” *The Review of Politics* 57:1 (Winter 1995), pp. 105-32.; Ottmann, *Lost for Words?* p. 15.

¹³ Manuel Vásquez (*The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 110, n. 18), points out “the term restoration has been endorsed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger” according to whom it means “the search for a new equilibrium after all the exaggerations of an indiscriminate opening to the world” quoting from *The Ratzinger Report* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985, pp. 37-38). In the mid-1980s, Pope John Paul II began replacing progressive bishops with conservative ones, warned those that remained, intervened in religious orders, and attempted to censor publications, among other things, to curtail liberationist Catholicism. See e.g. Kenneth Serbin, “Religious Tolerance, Church-State Relations, and the Challenge of Pluralism.” In *Religious Freedom and Evangelization in Latin America: The Challenge of Religious Pluralism*, edited by Paul E. Sigmund (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999).

¹⁴ The *Atlas da Filiação Religiosa e Indicadores Sociais no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro; São Paulo: Editora PUC-Rio; Loyola; CNBB, 2003) explains that the territory of where Catholicism has remained strongest is in the largest part of the Northeast (excluding western Maranhão and southeastern Bahia), almost the entire state of Minas Gerais, and the central part of Santa Catarina and regions near the south of Paraná and the north of Rio Grande do Sul. “With respect to the Northeast, it includes low density areas, particularly the *sertão*, where there is a strong, old, and efficient social and political control by the traditional oligarchies. But to understand the force of the Catholic religion there, one has to consider the weight of the religiosity, of popular beliefs, of oral traditions, and the lesser influence of means of communication in the change of attitudes of its population” (Jacob et al., *Atlas da Filiação Religiosa*, p. 127). An analysis of the 2000 census by Alberto Antoniazzi (“As Religiões No Brasil Segundo O Censo De 2000.” *Revista de Estudos da Religião* 2003, 2 (2003), pp. 75-80, p. 80) reveals that “the most Catholic states belong to those northeastern states with arid interiors (Piauí 91.4%, Ceará 84.9%, Paraíba 81.7%, Maranhão 83%, Alagoas 81.9%, Sergipe 81.7%, Rio Grande do Norte 81.7%).”

¹⁵ Madeleine Cousineau Adriance, *Promised Land: Base Christian Communities and the Struggle for the Amazon, Suny Series in Religion, Culture, and Society* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 167.

recount in this article, I provide additional evidence, through forms of organization broader than those of the base ecclesial communities (CEBs—*comunidades eclesiais de base*), of the continuing influence and importance of the theology of liberation.

THE EXAGGERATED DEATH OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY: THE DEBATE

Since the political opening that culminated in a return to democracy in Brazil in the mid-1980s, there has been an ongoing discussion as to the status of liberation theology both as a doctrine and as the inspiration of the “popular church.”¹⁶ With the “Vatican restoration offensive,” and the threat to Catholicism that some see in new religious pluralism in Latin America, scholars are trying to understand the limits placed on the practice of liberation theology. To that end, there has been an almost exclusive focus on the expansion or contraction of CEBs in Brazil.¹⁷ There has also been a tendency for academic studies to be conducted in urban settings, while continued vibrancy of activism associated with liberation theology and of Catholicism itself may be most apparent in rural areas, particularly the North and Northeast.¹⁸ As discussed below, the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST—*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra*), with its roots in the Church’s Pastoral Land Commission (CPT—*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*), continues to rely on local pastoral agents to “accompany” the settlement residents as they establish their communities.¹⁹ Positions range from those with the hope and belief in the survival of the liberationist perspective

¹⁶ Vásquez, *The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity*, p. 1.

¹⁷ W. E. Hewitt, *Base Christian Communities and Social Change in Brazil* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991); Charmain Levy, “Cebes in Crisis: Leadership Structures in the São Paulo Area,” in *The Church at the Grassroots in Latin America: Perspectives on Thirty Years of Activism*, eds. John Burdick and W. E. Hewitt (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000), pp. 167-82; Scott Mainwaring, “Grass-Roots Catholic Groups and Politics in Brazil,” in *The Progressive Church in Latin America*, eds. Scott Mainwaring and Alexander Wilde (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 151-92; David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology, Religion in the Americas Series, V. 1* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), pp. 165-177.

¹⁸ Madeleine Adriance, for example, notes: “The action of CEBs in relation to peasant mobilization may thus have more impact on the future of Brazil than the action of CEBs in the cities” (*Promised Land*, p. 167). For a fine-grained picture of Catholic activism in an urban setting, see Ana Maria Doimo, “Social Movements and the Catholic Church in Vitória, Brazil,” in *The Progressive Church in Latin America*, eds. Scott Mainwaring and Alexander Wilde (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 193-223.

¹⁹ Sue Branford, and Jan Rocha, *Cutting the Wire: The Story of the Landless Movement in Brazil* (London: Latin American Bureau, 2002), pp. 42-43; John Burdick, *Legacies of Liberation: The Progressive Catholic Church in Brazil at the Start of a New Millennium* (Aldershot ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 101-135; Peter P. Houtzager, “Collective Action and Political Authority: Rural Workers, Church, and State in Brazil,” *Theory and Society* 30 (2001), pp. 1-45.

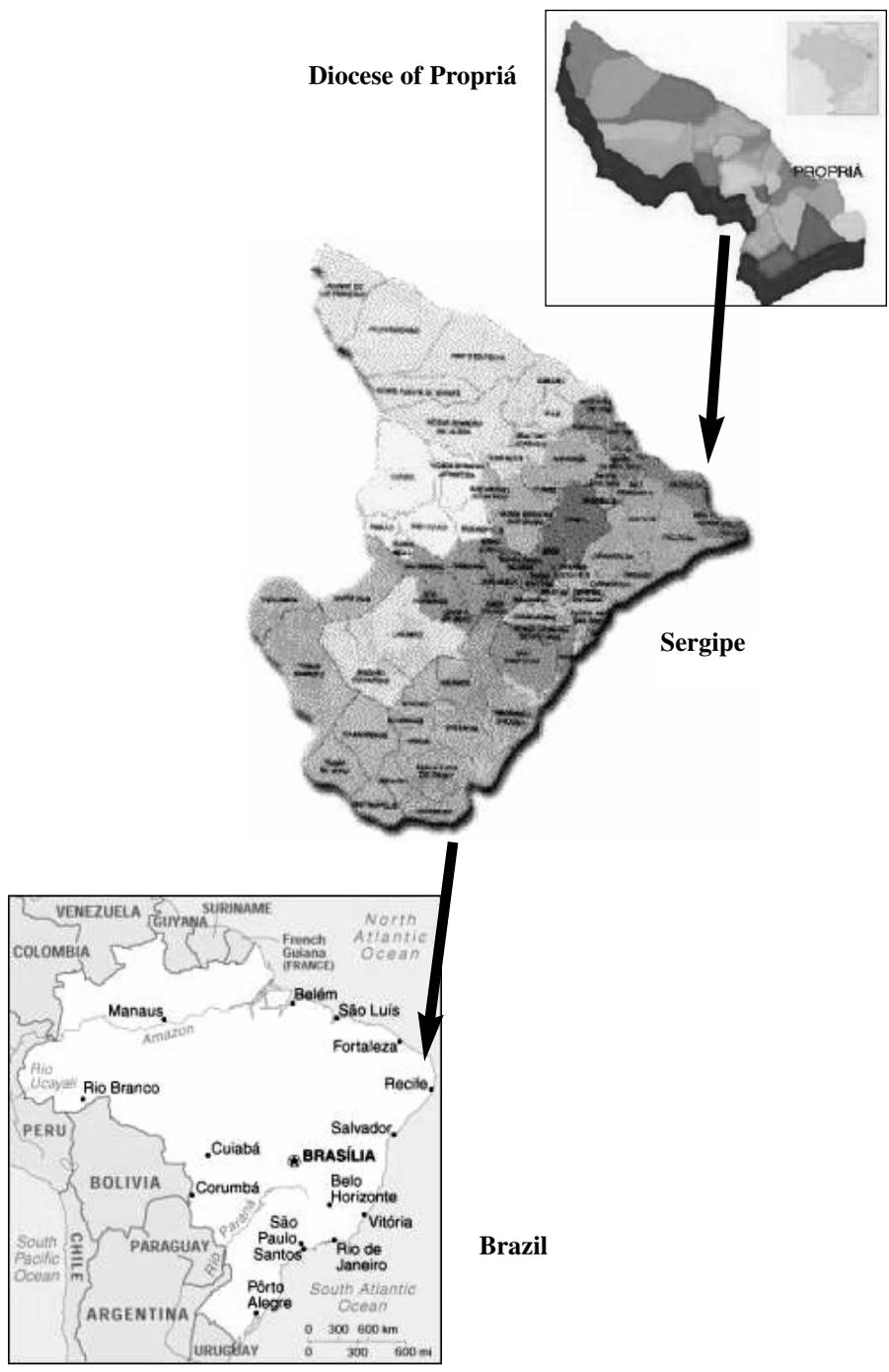


Figure 3: Diocese of Propriá, Sergipe, Brazil

within the Church²⁰ to those who have declared the death and burial of the “activist Church.”²¹ There are also scholars whose positions have begun to take into consideration the overstatements on both sides of the debate and are finding grounds for understanding the nature of both the tamping down and the survival of doctrine and practice associated with liberation theology.²²

For example, anthropologist John Burdick, in the early 1990s, was associated with a pessimistic view of the prospects for liberationist practice by Catholic Church pastoral agents. Since then, he has reconsidered his earlier position and has begun thinking about the “long-term legacies of the liberationist Church” in Brazil.²³ In 2000, Burdick and Hewitt published an edited collection in which they reflected on the academic literature on Latin America that has almost unanimously painted a “gloomy portrait of the progressive ‘experiment’ within the regional Catholic Church” and has spent “much energy recounting and analyzing the hard times suffered by the Catholic Left.”²⁴ Familiar explanations for why there has been “a ‘decline’ of progressive Catholicism” include the return of civilian politics, the Vatican’s opposition, the paternalism of the CEB model, the shortage of priests, competition with Protestant churches, and the impact of economic hard times.²⁵

²⁰ See e.g. Adriance, *Promised Land*; Madeleine Adriance, “Agents of Change: The Roles of Priests, Sisters, and Lay Workers in the Grassroots Catholic Church in Brazil,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30:3 (September 1991), pp. 292-305; Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza, “As Várias Faces da Igreja Católica,” *Estudos Avançados* 18:52 (2004), pp. 77-95.; Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza, “Roman Catholic Church and the Experience of Democracy in Latin America;” Ribeiro, “Has Liberation Theology Died?”

²¹ See e.g. John Burdick, *Looking for God in Brazil: The Progressive Catholic Church in Urban Brazil’s Religious Arena* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Edward L. Cleary, and Hannah W. Stewart-Gambino, *Conflict and Competition: The Latin American Church in a Changing Environment* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992); Jean Daudelin, and W.E. Hewitt, “Churches and Politics in Latin America: Catholicism at the Crossroads,” *Third World Quarterly* 16:2 (June 1995), pp. 221-36; Bryan L. Kennedy, “Book Review: Goetz Frank Ottmann, *Lost for Words? Brazilian Liberationism in the 1990s*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 81:4 (October 2004), pp. 575-76; Robin Nagle, *Claiming the Virgin: The Broken Promise of Liberation Theology in Brazil* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

²² Burdick, *Legacies of Liberation*; Levine, “Review Essay: On Premature Reports of the Death of Liberation Theology;” Ottmann, *Lost for Words?*; Vazquez, *The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity*

²³ Burdick, *Legacies of Liberation*.

²⁴ The first quote is from W.E. Hewitt, “Introduction: The Legacy of the Progressive Church in Latin America” In *The Church at the Grassroots in Latin America: Perspectives on Thirty Years of Activism*, edited by John Burdick and W. E. Hewitt, pp. vii-xix (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000), p. ix; and the second is from John Burdick, “Afterword” In *The Church at the Grassroots in Latin America: Perspectives on Thirty Years of Activism*, edited by John Burdick and W. E. Hewitt (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000), p. 205.

²⁵ Burdick, “Afterword,” p. 205; Vázquez, *The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity*, p. 102 (explicating the progressive reading of the crisis). Ottmann, *Lost for Words?* adds to this list

These explanations, and others, are often also cited in connection with the rising percentage of Pentecostal and evangelical Protestant converts in Brazil and throughout Latin America,²⁶ although there has been practically no literature produced examining the rising percentage of Brazilians (predominantly urban) who proclaim they have no religion.²⁷ Provoking a lively discussion, a recent offering by anthropologist Peter Cahn critiques the view that there is a “religious marketplace” in which Protestantism is being chosen more frequently than Roman Catholicism in Latin America and eschews “economic language for theorizing reasons for religious affiliation in Latin America.”²⁸ The parallel debates currently taking place regarding the health of the Latin American Catholic Church and the subset of liberation theology are surrogates for larger academic arguments on the world stage about the hope or lack thereof in the survival of a leftist or progressive perspective, religious or secular.

As such, Burdick also weighs in. He has come to believe that “rumors of [the Catholic Left’s] demise are undoubtedly exaggerated” and proposes a “legacy of ideas and value orientations” that has fostered “a sense of empowerment and self-esteem” and “kept alive the dream of social justice.”²⁹ In his

complacency associated with improvements in living conditions and what he considers the historical inflexibility of liberationist discourse. Vázquez later (p. 221) enunciates his theory as to the “institutional, structural, and systemic obstacles that hinder the production, circulation, and reception of the liberationist messages on the ground.” Those obstacles include “the conservative Vatican offensive, the persistence of clientelism and political corruption, the economic crisis, the restructuring of the Brazilian work force, a legitimation crisis that undermines the development of Brazilian civil society, the crisis of the Latin American left and, more broadly, of modern emancipatory discourses, the rise of a populist right, and the advent of a new phase of capitalist accumulation” (Vázquez, p. 222).

²⁶ See e.g. R. Andrew Chestnut, *Competitive Spirits : Latin America’s New Religious Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); R. Andrew Chestnut, *Born Again in Brazil : The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Anthony James Gill, *Rendering Unto Caesar: The Catholic Church and the State in Latin America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Rowan Ireland, *Kingdoms Come: Religion and Politics in Brazil, Pitt Latin American Series* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991); David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?: The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Virginia Garrard-Burnett, and David Stoll, *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

²⁷ Employing official census figures, Jacob et al. (*Atlas da Filiação Religiosa*, p. 33) report that between 1980 and 1991 evangelicals grew 2.4% while those without religion grew 3.1% (Catholics lost 5.7%), and between 1991 and 2000 those without religion grew another 2.7% (while evangelicals grew 6.6% and Catholics lost 6.6%). See also Frances Hagopian, “Latin American Catholicism in an Age of Religious and Political Pluralism: A Framework for Analysis,” Paper presented at the conference on Contemporary Catholicism, Religious Pluralism, and Democracy in Latin America: Challenges, Responses, and Impact, Notre Dame, IN, March 31-April 1, 2005, as revised 2006.

²⁸ Peter S. Cahn, “A Standoffish Priest and Sticky Catholics: Questioning the Religious Marketplace in Tzintzuntzan, Mexico,” *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 10:1 (April 2005), pp. 1-26, 2.

²⁹ Burdick, “Afterword,” pp. 205, 206.

most recent book on the subject, Burdick concludes that “Catholic liberationist ideas and values continue to make themselves felt” in Brazilian society.³⁰ He argues that “the liberationist stance continues to exert significant, if not always obvious, influence” over three “main arenas of social and political struggles.”³¹ The book provides examples from the black pastoral, women’s movements, and the influence of the Church in the shaping of the MST leadership and its continuing presence on MST settlements.³² Citing the decline in interest in liberationist Christianity and increase in doctoral research and academic production on Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity, Burdick would like to see a “return [of] the study of present-day liberationist Catholicism to its proper place, as central to our understanding of Brazilian society.”³³ I am sympathetic to Burdick’s revised view and am in agreement with him that it would be a mistake to downplay the difficulties and setbacks faced as a result of the Vatican’s hostility to liberation theology since the advent of John Paul II’s papacy, including in relation to progressive Church work conducted in Sergipe (the setting of this article).

It is my intention in this article, however, to consider local manifestations of liberation theology in rural Brazil within the general rubric of Burdick’s proposal, but closer to the fabric of the Church than Burdick’s more diffuse notion of “legacy.” Even a cursory perusal of the debates within the Church itself, for example, over the meaning of pronouncements that came out of the Puebla conference in 1979 or the possibility of a new Vatican Council, reveal the continuing struggle being waged by progressive forces within the Church.³⁴ As Hewitt observed in 2000, there are clergy “who continue to be involved at some level or another with church-based and secular organizations dedicated to the service of the ‘poor and oppressed.’ Who are these individuals, and what is the nature of their current involvement?”³⁵ This article is intended to answer his question by providing an example from the

³⁰ Burdick, *Legacies of Liberation*, p. 11.

³¹ Burdick, *Legacies of Liberation*, p. 10.

³² A visit to the MST website reveals that Burdick’s research is reinforced at the highest levels of leadership. In May 2005, a march was called by two liberationist Church figures (Dom Tomás Balduino and Luiz Bassegio) as part of the Cry of the Excluded (*Grito dos Excluídos*) campaign for work, justice, and life in support of land reform. In support of the march, the call includes a quote from Pope John Paul II (“Não é justo, humano e cristão permanecerem incultivadas as terras que escondem o pão para tanta gente”/It is not just, human, and Christian that land that hides food for so many people remains uncultivated) (www.mst.org.br/campanha/mobiliz.htm, accessed July 9, 2006).

³³ Burdick, *Legacies of Liberation*, p. 10.

³⁴ See Luiz Alberto Gómez de Souza, *Do Vaticano II a Um Novo Concílio? O Olhar de Um Cristão Leigo Sobre a Igreja* (São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 2004); Barbara Fraser and Paul Jeffrey, “Latin America: Search for a Future, Part 1: Introduction: Power or Credibility?” *National Catholic Reporter*, May 14, 2004.

³⁵ Hewitt, “Introduction,” p. ix.

rural Northeast of how liberationist Catholicism has continued to shape the work of pastoral agents and the people who live there.

FREI ENOQUE AND THE XOCÓ INDIANS:
FIRST LAND STRUGGLE IN THE DIOCESE

At the height of the most repressive period of the Brazilian military regime, a young seminarian from the northeastern state of Pernambuco, Enoque Salvador de Melo, known as Frei Enoque, traveled to the tiny state of Sergipe and went straight to the backland county seat of Porto da Folha (see figure 4). There, at the end of 1970, he began assembling a team of pastoral agents to carry out the training, based on liberation theology doctrine, he had received at Dom Hélder Câmara's Theological Institute of Recife (ITER).³⁶ As a young man, Enoque defied his family's desire for him to attend law school and instead entered a monastery in the sugar cane region in February 1967, where people would come to hide from security forces and gunmen who were still hunting down remnants of the peasant leagues.³⁷ In February 1968, Enoque took a three-year vow of poverty and was transferred to a monastery in Olinda, the seat of the Recife archdiocese to which Dom Hélder had been moved when the military came to power in 1964.³⁸ There, Enoque studied philosophy and theology at the brand new Theological Institute,³⁹ where, for the first time, Carmelites, Franciscans, and other orders, as well as young men and women who were not seminarians were brought together by Dom Hélder's vision of the meaning of Vatican Council II, which was informed by his friendship with the new Pope Paul VI.⁴⁰

While Enoque was at the Institute, General Costa e Silva issued the repressive Institutional Act No. 5 (known as AI-5) on December 13, 1968,

³⁶ Dom Hélder Câmara founded the Conference of Brazilian Bishops in 1952, known for its independence and progressive stances, and the Latin American Episcopal Council (CELAM) in 1955. Dom Hélder, as a bishop and then archbishop, until his death at the age of 90 in 1999, was "a champion of Brazil's poor and a pioneer of Latin America's liberation theology movement . . . which found justification for social change in the Gospel." Beatriz Lecumberri, "Brazil's Hélder Câmara, Champion of Poor, Dies at 90" (Agence France Presse, 28 August 1999), accessed July 9, 2006 at <http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/42/084.html>.

³⁷ Enoque Salvador de Melo, Interview by Maria Neide Sobral da Silva. Poço Redondo, Sergipe: CENDOP (Centro de Documentação e Pesquisa do Baixo São Francisco), p. 997.

³⁸ Enoque Salvador de Melo, Interview by Maria Neide Sobral da Silva.

³⁹ Enoque Salvador de Melo "Interview" in Osmário Santos, *Memórias De Políticos De Sergipe No Século XX* (Aracaju: Gráfica J. Andrade, 2002), pp. 213-217 (first published in *Jornal da Cidade*, July 29, 2001).

⁴⁰ Enoque Salvador de Melo, Interview by author, Aracaju, Sergipe, 1998.



Figure 4: Frei Enoque Salvador de Melo, photograph by Jan Hoffman French (August 2000). Frei Enoque at the Romaria da Terra on São Pedro Island, August 2000

in a crackdown on civil society that marked the low point of the regime.⁴¹ This meant that “the Church lost its invulnerability and became subject to attack.”⁴² In spite of the issuance of AI-5, Dom Hélder continued to support student demonstrations. This led to a series of repressive acts that culminated in the assassination in May 1969 of Padre Antônio Henrique Pereira Neto, a 28-year-old priest who Dom Hélder considered to be like a son.⁴³ This was one of the first open acts of repression against the Catholic Church, which became full blown after the inauguration of General Médici as president later that year.

⁴¹ This crackdown came shortly after the CELAM meeting in Medellín in 1968. CELAM is the acronym for Conferencia Episcopal Latinoamericana (Latin American Episcopal Conference), the regional Catholic bishops’ conference, founded by Dom Hélder Câmara in 1955. Its second general meeting was held in Medellín in 1968 and is known for its official endorsement and articulation of liberation theology doctrine. The Archdiocese of São Paulo in its report on torture in Brazil described AI-5 as “barefaced dictatorship.” The national congress, six state legislative assemblies, and dozens of city councils were disbanded. Sixty-nine members of Congress were removed from office (Joan Dassin, ed., *Torture in Brazil: A Report by the Archdiocese of São Paulo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 52.

⁴² Scott Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil, 1916-1985* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), p. 102.

⁴³ Nelson Piletti and Walter Praxedes, *Dom Hélder Câmara: Entre o Poder e a Profecia* (São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1997), pp. 354-55.

Enoque, the same age as the murdered priest, was studying at the Institute and working in the interior,⁴⁴ already putting into practice what he was learning as a member of one of the “small communities,” a form of experimental learning among the poor, fostered by Dom Hélder and under attack by large sectors of the Church establishment.⁴⁵ During his time at the Institute, Enoque was most drawn to Joseph Comblin, the Belgian priest who was a major architect of the Medellín vision of liberation theology.⁴⁶ In fact, Enoque was a leader of the rebellion at the conservative seminary in Olinda where he lived while attending the Institute.⁴⁷ As such, he acted under the influence of Comblin, who was also involved with other such “changes in seminary life.”⁴⁸ Comblin was expelled from Brazil by the military government shortly after Enoque left for Sergipe. So when “Frei Enoque” arrived there as a Franciscan friar during the worst drought in over a decade, he already had experience with repression and knew what it would mean to continue his practice even as the authorities in Sergipe took note of his arrival. They immediately began harassing him and his team of friars, nuns, and lay religious workers, because as Frei Enoque has noted, “This was a different way of being a priest. We would go into the streets, talking, discussing, and taking positions. So there began to develop, in a [small interior] city like Porto da Folha, groups of people going to demand things from the mayor. You can imagine in this terrible, sad moment . . . one of us was imprisoned and we were labelled communists.”⁴⁹ All of this was going on as they prepared to go into the countryside to minister to the poorest counties in Brazil in the early days of 1971.⁵⁰

On the national scene, conflict between the Church and the government worsened in 1970 when security agents invaded Church houses in Rio de Janeiro. In addition to jailing and torturing militant priests and activists, security forces mistreated the provincial head of the Jesuit order and president of Rio’s Catholic university. They also detained the secretary general of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB). Brazil’s cardinals and Pope Paul VI began to openly condemn and protest the violence of the

⁴⁴ Enoque Salvador de Melo “Interview” in *Memórias De Políticos De Sergipe No Século XX*.

⁴⁵ Kenneth P. Serbin, *Needs of the Heart: A Social and Cultural History of Brazil’s Clergy and Seminaries* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), pp. 258-264.

⁴⁶ Enoque Salvador de Melo, Interview by Maria Neide Sobral da Silva..

⁴⁷ Enoque Salvador de Melo, Interview by Maria Neide Sobral da Silva.

⁴⁸ Serbin, *Needs of the Heart*, p. 258.

⁴⁹ Enoque Salvador de Melo, Interview by Maria Neide Sobral da Silva. All translations in this article are the author’s.

⁵⁰ Lampião and his band of *cangaceiros* (bandits) spent much time in the counties of Porto da Folha and Poço Redondo and were captured and beheaded at the grotto of Angicos in Poço Redondo in 1938. Frei Enoque and others often invoke this event and the presence of the bandits to explain the character of the area.

regime.⁵¹ For the Church in Brazil, 1971 was a key year.⁵² That year all four regional bishops' groups from the Amazon issued strong denunciations of the military regime's policies, including criticisms of torture, repression of peasants trying to protect their land, and the invasion and dispossession of indigenous groups.⁵³ Centralization of Church decisions in the CNBB was decisive in renovating missionary philosophy and pastoral work among the poor and indigenous peoples.⁵⁴

For Frei Enoque, 1971 ended with his ordination and appointment as parish priest of Porto da Folha, the largest county in Sergipe, with a long riverfront border along the São Francisco River and land that extended far into the interior, severely affected by the drought that would continue for two more years. In 1971, Enoque began visiting the rural workers and sharecroppers who lived and worked on the riverfront land of the Brittos,⁵⁵ a politically and economically powerful local oligarchical family.⁵⁶ One of the workers had sued the Brittos under labor legislation to no avail, and many of them had joined the local rural workers union just as Frei Enoque was entering the scene.⁵⁷

All of this seminal activity was happening well before students, professors, and urban intellectuals took up the cause of squatters (*posseiros*) and the landless, which did not begin until 1978. Back in 1971, while Frei Enoque was beginning his work, activists in the capital were living under a cloud of government repression, made worse by the death in April 1970 of Dom José Vicente Távora, a close friend and colleague of Hélder Câmara's, who had served as archbishop of Aracaju, the state capital, since 1960.⁵⁸ Their situa-

⁵¹ For a perspective emphasizing continuity in Church-State relations through an analysis of the secret meetings under the aegis of the Bipartite Commission, see Kenneth P. Serbin, *Secret Dialogues: Church-State Relations, Torture, and Social Justice in Authoritarian Brazil* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

⁵² Paula Montero, *Entre o Mito e a História: O V Centenário do Descobrimento da América* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1996), p. 110.

⁵³ Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil*, p. 88.

⁵⁴ Montero, *Entre o Mito e a História*, p. 111.

⁵⁵ Enoque Salvador de Melo, interview by author.

⁵⁶ Interestingly, the Britto family is widely known to have aided Lampião and his bandits back in the 1930s (Billy Jaynes Chandler, *The Bandit King: Lampião of Brazil* (College Station and London: Texas A&M University Press, 1978), p. 186.

⁵⁷ *Raimundo Bezerra Lima vs. Elizabeth Guimarnes Britto*. Labor Case. Juízo de Direito da Comarca de Porto da Folha. Filed August 27, 1971. Decided September 27, 1971 (Judge Manoel Soares Pinto). For more about this lawsuit, see Jan Hoffman French, "The Rewards of Resistance," pp. 105-108.

⁵⁸ Dom Távora had founded the Young Catholic Workers movement in 1948 and devoted the rest of his life (until 1970) to promoting the cause of workers, the poor, and the dispossessed. Dom Távora's left-leaning political activities were largely responsible for the decision to send him to the smallest state in the poorest region of the country, presumably hoping it would reduce his influence. However, in 1960

tion was further worsened by the assumption of the archbishopric by Dom Luciano Duarte, who was unflinchingly allied with the military. Dom Luciano, in power until 1998, facilitated the complete repression of the nascent Catholic student movement, and expelled a number of foreign priests from the archdiocese who supported liberation theology.⁵⁹ What made Frei Enoque's activities possible, in spite of the repression taking place in the state capital, was the support he received from Dom José Brandão de Castro, the progressive bishop of the Propriá diocese, of which Porto da Folha was the largest parish. Dom José Brandão de Castro, the bishop who brought Frei Enoque to the Propriá diocese and ordained him at the end of 1971, was the first bishop of the Propriá diocese, established in 1960 by Pope John XXIII. Because bishops enjoy significant autonomy, Dom José Brandão's diocese became a haven for those involved with early land struggles; and as we shall see, the first such struggle was that of the Xocó Indians.

The plight of Indians living in the Amazon region first became of interest to the Church, as expressed by the bishops of that region, in November 1971: "We see in the entire country the invasion and violent dispossession of Indian lands. Their human rights are practically not recognized, bringing them to the brink of cultural and biological death, as has already happened to many Brazilian tribes."⁶⁰ This was the first time that a non-assimilationist approach was considered and asserted by the Brazilian Church.⁶¹ Possibly as the result of the international publicity given to the government-commissioned Figueredo Report (1968), the foreign press picked up on the report's evidence of genocide against Indians in Brazil, including pictures of Indians being tortured.⁶²

upon his arrival in Sergipe, Dom Távora immediately founded the MEB (Base Education Movement or Movimento Educação de Base) with federal financial support (from President Jânio Quadros) and served as its national leader (Piletti and Praxedes, *Dom Hélder Câmara*, p. 275; see also Emanuel Jehuda De Kadat, *Catholic Radicals in Brazil* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁵⁹ José Ibarê Costa Dantas, *A Tutela Militar Em Sergipe, 1964/1984* (Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro, 1997), p. 149.

⁶⁰ This comes from Comunicado Mensal da CNBB, No. 231, December 1971, quoted in "Y-Juca-Pirama, O Índio: Aquele que Deve Morrer," Documento de Urgência de Bispos e Missionários, 1973. One of the signatories of this document was Dom Tomás Balduino, bishop of Goiás, who had also been present at the creation of CIMI and in 2003, as president of the CPT, was made a member of the Council of Economic and Social Development, established by President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva.

⁶¹ In March 1971 in Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon, a meeting of bishops of five countries (Peru, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia) issued a document that Balduino considers the origin of the profound change happening in the indigenist missionary Church of Latin America. Tomás Balduino, "Fraccionalismo Indígena E Poder Clerical." In *A Igreja e o Exercício do Poder*, edited by Maria Helena Arrochellas (Rio de Janeiro: Instituto de Estudos da Religião, 1992), p. 84.

⁶² Seth Garfield, "The 'Greatest Administrative Scandal'." In *The Brazil Reader: History, Culture Politics*, edited by Robert M. Levine and John J. Crocitti (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999),

Along a parallel track, in early 1971, a group of well-respected anthropologists from around the world, including Darcy Ribeiro, one of the most important Brazilian anthropologists, met in Barbados and issued a declaration critical of the Latin American states' indigenous policies and of religious missions and anthropological work among Indians. The Barbados Declaration called for a "suspension of all missionary activity." This provoked a response from the Church through an ecumenical meeting in March 1972 with representatives of nine countries, in which those representatives promised to open space for a dialogue and for participation of Indians in the missions, with the goal of rethinking the long-standing goal of a "civilizing" mission. A month later, in April 1972, a group of 25 Brazilian missionaries gathered at the suggestion of Ivo Lorscheiter, Secretary General of the CNBB, to discuss a new law that was to become the Indian Statute of 1973.⁶³ This was the birth of the Indigenist Missionary Council (CIMI), a pastoral group devoted to missionary work among Indians officially tied to the CNBB and still active today.⁶⁴ The same week that the Indian Statute became law, and with AI-5 still in force, bishops published a response, "Y-Juca-Pirama; o índio: aquele que deve morrer" ("the Indian: he who must die") stating that

pp. 270-71. In 1967, Attorney General Jader Figueiredo was given the mandate to investigate corruption in the Indigenous Protection Service (SPI—Serviço de Proteção aos Índios). As a result of this report, the military government abolished SPI and created the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI—Fundação Nacional do Índio). To illustrate the split in the Church's thinking at that time, the year before the bishops' statement defending indigenous rights, in 1970, thirty-two prelates in Amazonia declared the Figueiredo denunciations "exaggerated," thus supporting the Médici government. Paulo Suess, *A Causa Indígena na Caminhada e a Proposta do CIMI: 1972-1989* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1989), p. 18.

⁶³ Indigenous land rights took shape only after the military began a concerted expansion into the interior. As the government was creating administrative means for defining indigenous areas, non-indigenous settlers were invading their territory (Stephan Schwartzman, Ana Valéria Araújo, and Paulo Pankararú. "Brazil: The Legal Battle over Indigenous Rights." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 29:5 (March-April 1996), pp. 36-43). It is generally accepted that the military was motivated by a perceived need to occupy the Amazon with Brazilians for fear that it would be overrun by foreigners (Xavier Albó, "And from Kataristas to Mnristas." In *Indigenous Peoples and Democracy in Latin America*, edited by Donna Lee Van Cott (New York: St. Martin's Press and Inter-American Dialogue, 1994). The best way to rationally order Amazon development, they felt, was to remove Indians from the "path of progress" and to place them in specified, legally demarcated territories (Schwartzman, "Brazil," p. 37). Since property relations in that region were murky, the demarcation of indigenous land would also help create marketable title (Schwartzman, "Brazil," p. 38).

⁶⁴ A full history of CIMI has yet to be written. Just as CIMI remains active, so the Indian Statute of 1973 remains in force in 2006. Significantly, and perhaps in response to the CNBB's creation of CIMI, Médici vetoed the sections of the law that would have given missionaries and anthropologists the right to give assistance to indigenous groups without prior approval by the government. See Addendum to "Y-Juca-Pirama, O Índio: Aquele que Deve Morrer," Documento de Urgência de Bispos e Missionários, 1973 in Paulo Suess, *Em Defesa Dos Povos Indígenas: Documentação E Legislação* (São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1980). For an analysis of the importance of the definitional section of the Indian Statute for northeastern recognitions, see Jan Hoffman French, "Mestizaje and Law Making in Indigenous Identity Formation in Northeastern Brazil: 'after the Conflict Came the History'," *American Anthropologist* 106:4 (December 2004), pp. 663-674.

“our work will no longer be to ‘civilize’ the Indians.”⁶⁵ That same year, 1973, the most radical pronouncements made by a Church apparatus appeared—statements issued by the Amazon and Northeast region bishops.⁶⁶ It is not coincidental that CIMI came into being just around the time that Frei Enoque was beginning his relationship with the people on the Brittos’ extensive ranch, known as Caiçara. However, it is notable that Frei Enoque was doing his work not among Amazonian Indians, but among mixed-race, backland rural workers in the Northeast, where it was assumed that for over a 150 years indigenous peoples had been assimilated into the rural population.

As pointed out by historian Seth Garfield, the implementation of the 1973 Indian Statute operated as a double-edged sword. At the same time that economic development and private investors were destroying indigenous communities in the Amazon, streamlined demarcation, as championed by the military, “broke political ground for the Indians to stake their claims.”⁶⁷ The military’s policy was an attempt to consolidate federal power vis-à-vis regional and state elites in traditional indigenous regions, such as Amazônia Legal, historically considered “vulnerable to foreign invasion and communist infiltration.”⁶⁸ The Northeast does not fall within Garfield’s analysis since it was not vulnerable to foreign invasion and has always had a relatively homogeneous, stable population, practically no immigration, and a declining economy. However, the 1969 Constitution and the 1973 Indian Statute inadvertently created opportunities for indigenous identity expansion. Although the military was interested in consolidating federal power in the Amazon, in the Northeast the government found itself supporting a nationalist project of

⁶⁵ Suesc, *Em Defesa dos Povos Indígena*, p. 53.

⁶⁶ Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil* (1986); Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London; New York: Verso, 1996). Evidence of this can be seen in the two most-quoted statements by the bishops of the Amazon and the Northeast, respectively, as being the most radical statements ever issued by a Catholic Church official body: *O Grito das Igrejas* (The Cry of the Churches) and *Ouvi os Clamores do Meu Povo* (I Heard the Outcry of My People) (Löwy, *The War of Gods*, p. 87; Martins, “A Igreja Face à Política Agrária do Estado”). These statements were issued in the wake of the 13th General Assembly of the CNBB held on the 25th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil*, 1986, p. 112). A month after the bishops’ statements were issued, Law No. 5,889 was enacted (regulated by Decree 73,626 of February 12, 1974) extending the Consolidation of Labor Laws to rural workers, giving them, by law, at least if not everywhere in practice, employment stability and social security (Robert W. Shirley, “Law in Rural Brazil.” In *Brazil: Anthropological Perspectives, Essays in Honor of Charles Wagley*, edited by Maxine L. Margolis and William E. Carter (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 358). In 1975, the CPT was founded and the following year, the Bahia/Sergipe CPT was born (“Entrevista com Dom José Brando de Castro, Transcript of Recording.” *Tribuna de Aracaju*, May 22, 1977).

⁶⁷ Seth Garfield, “Where the Earth Touches the Sky: The Xavante Indians’ Struggle for Land in Brazil, 1951-1979.” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 80:3 (August 2000), pp. 537-63, 546.

⁶⁸ Seth Garfield, *Indigenous Struggle at the Heart of Brazil: State Policy, Frontier Expansion, and the Xavante Indians, 1937-1988* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 542.

rooting Brazilian heritage in its indigenous history. Discovering and reconstituting tribes in the Northeast has contributed to consolidating Brazil as an indigenous nation. In fact, the Xocó Indians, whose recognition was the result of a land struggle, turned out to be one of the first of over thirty newly recognized tribes in the Northeast over the following two decades.⁶⁹

CATHOLIC MISSIONARIES DEDICATED TO REVIVING INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

As described above, the establishment of CIMI was the result of a group of rapidly radicalizing bishops in the Amazon and the Northeast. The bishops were meeting regularly and issuing ever more militant episcopal statements, breaking with government development policies, calling for widespread land redistribution, and even questioning capitalism itself—exactly during the period often referred to as the “Brazilian economic miracle.”⁷⁰ However, CIMI was not just a political expression of the bishops’ interest in the impoverished and powerless. It can also be seen as the implementation of a longer-standing theological commitment of the Catholic Church to a pre-capitalist, communal sensibility.⁷¹ As elements in the leadership of the Church experienced intensifying state repression, they began to find solace in older ways of imagining property and the social relations attendant to it. On the one hand, there was increasing interest in land reform. On the other, was a rapid deployment of resources in favor of restitution to indigenous peoples for the wrongs perpetrated by the Church since the European discovery of Brazil in 1500. Moreover, increased valorization of a communal ethos in relation to land occupation had much to do with the traditional ways of life associated with the Church, many of whose leaders, themselves from rural families, were interested in recuperating the peasant tradition that had served as the basis of Church thought.⁷²

The Church’s commitment to advancing the cause of indigenous peoples, therefore, went beyond an intention to redeem the Church’s past disrespect-

⁶⁹ See e.g. José Maurício Andion Arruti, “From ‘Mixed Indians’ to ‘Indigenous Reminders’: Strategies of Ethnocide and Ethnogenesis in Northeastern Brazil” In *The Challenge of Diversity: Indigenous Peoples and Reform of the State in Latin America*, edited by Willem Assies, Gemma van der Haar and A. J. Hoekema (Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Thela Thesis, 1998), pp. 97-121; Jan Hoffman French, *The Rewards of Resistance*; João Pacheco de Oliveira Filho, ed., *A Viagem da Volta: Etnicidade, Política e Reelaboração Cultural no Nordeste Indígena* (Rio de Janeiro: Contra Capa Livraria, 1999); Jonathan W. Warren, *Racial Revolutions: Antiracism and Indian Resurgence in Brazil* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁷⁰ Mainwaring, *The Catholic Church and Politics in Brazil*, p. 87.

⁷¹ José de Souza Martins, “A Igreja Face à Política Agrária do Estado.” In *Igreja e Questão Agrária*, edited by Vanilda Paiva (São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1985), p. 125.

⁷² Martins, “A Igreja Face à Política Agrária do Estado,” p. 125.

ful behavior. Key to obtaining agreement from conservative bishops to pursue the new indigenous support strategy must have been, in part, the Church's need and desire to missionize. However, the project of missionizing in the late twentieth century required even more flexibility than it had in the past. As in the past, when the Church had become willing to accept popular and syncretic forms of folk Catholicism, it now became interested in reviving indigenous religious practices. Maintaining the flock, increasing its numbers worldwide, identifying new priests and nuns, keeping Protestant missionaries from gaining the upper hand, and bringing into the fold new generations were all essential to the Church's survival. Even the name of the Church entity, CIMI, which includes the word "missionary," reflects one of the purposes of its dedication to indigenous communities. The character of that missionizing remains a topic of much discussion in Church literature, ranging from "the paradigm of inculturation" to "Indian Theology" and "religious pluralism."⁷³

Just as the Church was revamping its position on indigenous peoples in Brazil and CIMI was being formed, Frei Enoque began visiting the rural workers on Caiçara (the Brittos' ranch) and found that São Pedro Island, located at the edge of the São Francisco River, across a small channel from Caiçara, had an old mission church and the ruins of a monastery. With the support and aid of bishop Dom José Brandão, he began researching the history of the church, its priests, and the people who had once lived in its environs. Although the sharecroppers on Caiçara were afraid to talk to him at first, Frei Enoque was persistent and the old folks were convinced to tell stories they had heard as children about maltreatment by the Brittos and Frei Doroteu, the Capuchin priest who had run the mission on São Pedro Island until the end of the nineteenth century. The only problem was that Frei Enoque's arrival in Caiçara was marked by immediate conflict with the Brittos, who expected the parish priest to do what priests had always done—minister to the needs of the powerful. However, Frei Enoque had determined from the beginning that he would refuse to work that way. This eventually caused problems for Dom José Brandão, who had, since his arrival a decade earlier, been close to the Britto family.

Relations between the Propriá diocese and the Brittos deteriorated over the course of the 1970s, leading to violent confrontations and threats by

⁷³ See e.g. Paulo Suess, "Romper o Mal-Estar na Missão: Os Povos Indígenas e a Igreja Pós-Conciliar," *Perspectiva Teológica* 34 (2002), pp. 11-36; Faustino Teixeira, "Inculturação da Fé e Pluralismo Religioso" In *RELAMI* (Rede Ecumênica Latino-Americana de Missiologias, www.missiologia.org.br/artigos/15_incult.php. (2002), accessed December 17, 2006.

members of the Britto family against the diocese.⁷⁴ Once the Brittos' Caiçara workers started self-identifying as Xocó Indians, they illegally occupied São Pedro Island. This action, taken with the support of the state's more left-leaning political leadership entering a phase of political opening, led to government recognition, the purchase of the island by the state, and its donation to the federal government for the Xocó. This was the first "land struggle" in Sergipe and served as an inspiration for many others.

THE HEYDAY OF DOM JOSÉ BRANDÃO DE CASTRO—
SERGIPE'S "RED BISHOP" (1960-1987)

Coinciding with the early political opening (*distenção*) that began with the presidency of General Ernesto Geisel, who took office in March 1974, and the surprising congressional elections later that year in which the opposition won more than one-third of Congress,⁷⁵ bishop Dom José Brandão officially began his public life as an advocate for the rural poor through his direct involvement with land struggles between 1974 and his retirement in 1987. At the end of 1974, conservative Sergipe politician, Leandro Maciel, "pointed the red finger" in a letter to Geisel in which he denounced Dom José as a communist.⁷⁶ Four years later, the mayor of Propriá, Antônio Britto, a member of the family forced to give up ownership of São Pedro Island and eventually all their property, including Caiçara, to the Xocó, filed a complaint with the federal police against Dom José accusing him of violating the National Security Law for acts of subversion.⁷⁷

Dom José Brandão decided to aid rural workers who had lived for generations under constant threat of expulsion. This threat came to a head in the 1970s when federal development policy became a reality in the São Francisco Valley and particularly in the Propriá diocese. The Development Company of the São Francisco Valley (CODEVASF), a successor agency to others that had been studying the region since the 1940s, instituted the irrigation phase of a development plan that was based on the need for hydroelectric power in the Northeast.⁷⁸ When the CODEVASF project was first being put into practice, Dom José Brandão still had a cordial relationship with the lead-

⁷⁴ See French, "Mestizaje and Law Making," p. 669.

⁷⁵ Thomas E. Skidmore, *The Politics of Military Rule in Brazil, 1964-85* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 172-73.

⁷⁶ Elio Gaspari, *A Ditadura Derrotada* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2003), p. 474.

⁷⁷ "Propriá: Mayor Quer D. Brandão na LSN," *Jornal de Sergipe*, December 5, 1978.

⁷⁸ Albert O.Hirschman, *Journeys toward Progress; Studies of Economic Policy-Making in Latin America* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1963).

ers of the local landowners and political bosses, although throughout his life, he had expressed a propensity for protecting poor people.⁷⁹

At first it seemed that CODEVASF, with its talk of land reform and irrigation projects, was embarking on a path that would alleviate suffering. However, before long it became obvious to Dom José Brandão that not only was the government expelling peasants from the land, but that the reconfiguration of property rights would make the land more valuable to the companies who would become the ultimate owners. Proper delineation of boundaries would reduce legal ambiguity about property ownership and clarify who, in fact, were “mere squatters,” albeit for generations. Dom José Brandão often told the story of his decision to stop supporting CODEVASF’s expropriation and redistribution of land when he saw the dispossessed workers of Fazenda Betume, down river from Propriá, living in the most inhumane conditions. Dom José considered this a period of his own conversion to the defense of the *homem do campo* (literally, “man of the field” or countryside) and his need for land.⁸⁰

The notion of the bishop being “converted” by rural workers is directly related to liberation theology discourse which, we repeat, describes itself as “an interpretation of Christian faith out of the suffering, struggle, and hope of the poor; a critique of society and the ideologies and sustaining it; a critique of the activity of the church and of Christians from the angle of the poor.”⁸¹ An explanation for the development of liberation theology given by sociologists linked to the Christian Left was that the Church changed because the “people” took over the institution. In fact, similar conversion stories can be found in other Latin American countries as well. For example, in Chiapas, Mexico,

Samuel Ruiz Garcia [the founder of Indian Theology] became the bishop of the diocese of San Cristóbal in 1960 [the same year as Dom José Brandão became the bishop of Propriá]. After a process of his own ‘conversion’ from

⁷⁹ Dom José was a member of the Redemptorist order, founded in 1732, which arrived in Brazil in 1893, and is devoted to “evangelizing especially the poor and most abandoned” (<http://www.praiseof-glory.com/redemptorist/whysite.htm>, Accessed August 31, 2004). Moreover, the Redemptorists are known in Brazil for running the sacred places (*santuários*) to which pilgrims come each year often from great distances (i.e. Bom Jesus da Lapa, Bahia, where the order arrived in 1956). Carlos Alberto Steil, *O Sertão das Romarias: Um Estudo Antropológico sobre o Santuário de Bom Jesus da Lapa-Bahia* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1996), p. 77. A goal of the Redemptorists is to reach the public that does not normally attend church, especially in rural areas, and thus are also known for their support of pilgrimages. Silvana de Souza Nascimento, “A Festa Vai à Cidade: Uma Etnografia da Romaria do Divino Pai Eterno, Goiás” *Religião e Sociedade* 22:2 (2002).

⁸⁰ Luciano Bernardi, “Dom José Brandão Bispo de Propriá (Se),” *O Mensageiro de Santo Antônio*, April 4, 1984, pp. 10-12.

⁸¹ Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, p. 6.

his former conservative views, by the early 1970s he was training catechists and giving masses with a strong liberation theology bent.⁸²

This was a bottom-up explanation that is not satisfactory in hindsight,⁸³ but one to which Dom José Brandão would have been amenable. A more official acceptance of liberation theology within the Church was important to progressive bishops such as Dom José Brandão. He was hoping to achieve this acceptance through the discourse about his own “conversion” by his flock, but it is clear that bringing Frei Enoque to Sergipe in 1970 was an act of support for liberation theology doctrine and practice well before his self-professed “conversion.” The order to which Dom José Brandão belonged, the Redemptorists, were known for their support of pilgrimage sites. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the first manifestations of support for land struggles was the bishop’s initiation of annual pilgrimages to sites of those struggles (*romarias da terra*), which continue into the present.⁸⁴ Such pilgrimages were instituted around Brazil by liberation theologians to support rural land struggles, in an excellent example of a reinvention of a traditional form in support of liberationist goals.⁸⁵ Land pilgrimages continue to be used widely by the CPT and the MST, often together, to cement what has become a much anticipated religious-political experience of those who struggle for land.⁸⁶

ANOTHER KIND OF PARADOX: THE CHURCH AND LAND STRUGGLES IN THE 1980S

During the 1970s, land reform and indigenous struggles were often intertwined.⁸⁷ Once the Xocó struggle hit stride in the mid-1970s, Dom José Brandão, Frei Enoque, and the newly constituted CPT became catalyzing forces for a series of land struggles in the diocese.⁸⁸ Those struggles attracted

⁸² Shannon Speed and Alvaro Reyes, ‘In Our Own Defense’: Rights and Resistance in Chiapas,” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 25:1 (May 2002), pp. 69-89.

⁸³ Löwy, *The War of Gods*, p. 40.

⁸⁴ At the end of October 1978, on the anniversary of Frei Doroteu’s death, in defiance of a court injunction, the Propriá diocese sponsored a land pilgrimage to São Pedro Island, the first of a series of annual pilgrimages to land struggle sites. The 1978 pilgrimage took place just as the families were consolidating their origin story as Xocó. It attracted hundreds of Church and trade union activists from the region. As a Catholic religious event, while affirming the families’ new identity as an indigenous tribe, it also cemented their devotion to the Church.

⁸⁵ Steil, *O Sertão das Romarias*, pp. 272-288.

⁸⁶ Burdick, *Legacies of Liberation*, p. 124.

⁸⁷ In 1975, a 39-page mimeographed document was produced as the result of a series of meetings with indigenous leaders and trade union federations: “A Single Outcry of Índios and Peasants: The Land for Those Who Work It” (*Um Só Clamor de Índios e Camponeses: A Terra para Quem Trabalha*).

⁸⁸ The national CPT was established in 1975 by the CNBB. Ivo Poletto and Antônio Canuto, eds. *Nas Pegadas do Povo da Terra* (São Paulo: Loyola, 2002), p. 50. Dom José Brandão and Frei Enoque

support from rural trade unions, academics, journalists, and politicians, some of whom were to become the organizers of the Workers Party (PT—Partido dos Trabalhadores) in Sergipe, founded in 1980. Also in 1980, the MST was established in the state, and Frei Enoque, who became involved with party politics during the 1980s (not the PT, which caused a split with some of his compatriots), would remain sympathetic and helpful to the MST over the following decades up to the present time. In fact, Frei Enoque would become mayor of the neighboring county of Poço Redondo, the poorest in Brazil, and the county with the highest rate of illiteracy in the Northeast until recently. Poço Redondo also has the highest number of MST settlements in the state and has been the site of raids on grocery stores and trucks carrying food.⁸⁹

In the mid-1980s, the political opening hit its stride and the country entered the pre-constitutional democratic transition (1985-1988). This is also the period that Ralph Della Cava has called “a partial conservative restoration” in the Church.⁹⁰ The gradual shift in the political balance in the Brazilian Church, which some say began with the CELAM meeting in Puebla (1979), came with Pope John Paul II’s bishopric appointments and disciplinary actions against radical priests who were proponents of liberation theology.⁹¹ This “reversal” of the Church’s policies just as democracy was taking hold in Brazil, the assertion this article is meant to explore, is sometimes referred to as a paradox. Peter Houtzager characterizes this period, with respect to the new unionism, as one in which the “Church was

attended the Regional Northeast III meeting of the CNBB at which the decision was made to found the Bahia/Sergipe CPT in 1976. In 1977, Dom José Brandão was chosen to represent the Church of the entire Northeast to testify about land fraud and violence in the countryside before an investigatory commission of the federal house of representatives (Câmara dos Deputados) (Marta Vieira Cruz, “Igreja Católica e Sindicato no Campo: Conservadorismo ou Transformação? (1975-1985).” Ph.D., Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 1992, pp. 117, 130). Land struggles in Sergipe in the 1980s included both CPT and MST-initiated actions. They occurred throughout the state, but the ones in the Propriá diocese include: Betume, Borda da Mata, Morro de Chaves, Monte Santo, Ilha do Ouro, Barra da Onça, Pedras Grandes, São Clemente, and Santana dos Frades (Rosemiro Magno da Silva and Eliano Sérgio Azevedo Lopes, *Conflitos de Terra e Reforma Agrária em Sergipe* (São Cristóvão, Sergipe: Editora UFS, 1996), p. 25). Sergipe rural trade unions supported by the diocese were also instrumental in supporting these struggles (Neilza Barreto de Oliveira and Centro Dom José Brandão de Castro, *Sindicato de Trabalhador Rural: Nosso (Des)Conhecido* (Aracaju: CDJBC, 1999).

⁸⁹ Although Frei Enoque has never run on a PT ticket (and has generally been loyal to the party of the then state government), he has been portrayed in the national press as “a sympathizer of the PT” (*O Estado de São Paulo*, February 23, 2003).

⁹⁰ Ralph Della Cava, “The ‘People’s Church,’ the Vatican, and Abertura,” in *Democratizing Brazil: Problems of Transition and Consolidation*, edited by Alfred C. Stepan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 159.

⁹¹ Löwy, *The War of Gods*, p. 132. In the 1990s, the Vatican nominated a number of arch-reactionary Opus Dei priests in Latin America and expelled the Cardinal brothers from their religious order in Nicaragua, Father Aristide from his order in Haiti, and forbade Leonardo Boff in Brazil from teaching, which provoked him to leave the priesthood.

reconciled with the state and retreated from its role as institutional host” leading to a loss of organizational resources and a “secularization of identity, a process that alienated much of its mass base.”⁹²

However, in the Propriá diocese of Sergipe, this period saw an increased number of land struggles involving both the CPT and the MST. A support committee of academics, students, trade unionists, journalists, lawyers, and Church progressives was formed in 1985. When the diocese officially joined the committee the following year, Frei Enoque, then vicar general of the diocese, received death threats from landowners and a nun coordinator of the CPT was beaten by hired gunmen.⁹³ As for the Xocó, their struggle did not end when they were recognized and received the right to live on São Pedro Island. Shortly thereafter, the battle for Caiçara (the Brittos’ ranch on the mainland across the canal from the island) was engaged.

By this time, the Brittos had sold the land to a lawyer from Alagoas, Coronel Jorge Pacheco, who referred to Frei Enoque as “satanic” and described liberation theology as “obeying the model of radical communism” of the Soviet Union. Pacheco claimed that he had gotten along well with the Xocó, letting them work for him and giving them mud for their ceramics, until Frei Enoque whipped them into a frenzy over getting his land.⁹⁴ In 1985, Caiçara, now owned by Pacheco, and the other properties, some of which were still owned by the Brittos, were identified by FUNAI as indigenous territory. In 1986, a meeting of newly recognized northeastern tribes was held on São Pedro Island and for the first time, the dance considered the primary evidence of Indianness, the *toré*, was performed inside the old mission church.⁹⁵ The following year, 300 Xocó Indians occupied Caiçara, were expelled by the military police under a judge’s order, and occupied the regional headquarters of FUNAI in Maceió, Alagoas, until the case was taken over by the federal prosecutor in Sergipe.

⁹² Peter P. Houtzager, “Social Movements Amidst Democratic Transitions: Lessons from the Brazilian Countryside.” *Journal of Development Studies* 36:5 (June 2000), pp. 59-88, 62.

⁹³ Silva and Lopes, *Conflitos de Terra*, pp. 77, 80. The CPT and Frei Enoque worked in parallel on behalf of landless rural workers (Interview by author with João Daniel, MST Coordinator, Sergipe, June 1, 2000).

⁹⁴ Jorge de Madeiros Pacheco, “A Farsa Do Ex-Bispo De Propriá E Do Vigário Frei Enoque.” *Jornal de Sergipe*, January 10 and 11, 1988, p. 10.

⁹⁵ Clarice Novaes da Mota, *Jurema’s Children in the Forest of Spirits: Healing and Ritual among Two Brazilian Indigenous Groups* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1997), p. 40. The *toré* was first noted in the 1930s among the Fulni-ô (in southern Pernambuco), the only northeastern tribe to retain its own language. Based on these findings, the government “instituted the *toré* as the basic criterion for recognition...and thus transformed it into a norm for being an Indian in the region.” (Arruti, “From ‘Mixed Indians’ to ‘Indigenous Reminders,’” p. 106).

This marked the beginning of a four-year period, starting with the October 1988 promulgation of the new federal constitution (improving rights of Indians and revamping the federal prosecutors' office to provide, among other things, the power to sue on behalf of indigenous people), in which the federal prosecutor brought a lawsuit in federal court to force FUNAI to proceed with demarcation of Caiçara.⁹⁶ During that period, 47 members of the Xocó tribe again occupied FUNAI headquarters, this time for four months, and finally in December 1991, President Fernando Collor signed the decree ratifying demarcation of Caiçara for the Xocó.⁹⁷ The MST began ratcheting up its occupations in the diocese, culminating in 1989 with the occupation of Fazenda Cruiri by a thousand families from around the state leading to tension and a series of other occupations in cooperation with rural trade unions, the diocese, and the CPT.⁹⁸

The end of the 1980s also marked an important transition in the Propriá diocese. Dom José Brandão fell ill and resigned as bishop, replaced in 1989 by Dom José Palmeira Lessa. Dom Lessa remained bishop there until 1995, when he became the archbishop of Aracaju. He had been transferred to Propriá from his position as auxiliary bishop of Rio de Janeiro under Dom Eugênio de Araújo Sales, considered by many to be an extremely conservative influence—the “principal spokesman” of the “conservative restoration” and a Church leader who attempted to muzzle the National Peace and Justice Commission in Rio in the mid-1970s.⁹⁹

More recently, however, that view has begun to be revised. Kenneth Serbin, writing of the secret Bipartite Commission (1970-1974), adopts a different, and more fully informed, perspective on Dom Eugênio's activities and approaches to the military regime and the pastoral agents repressed by it. Serbin disagrees with the view that Dom Eugênio was merely an “authoritarian opportunist” who promoted an alliance between the Church and the military. He points out “Dom Eugênio criticized

⁹⁶ The intervention of that prosecutor, Evaldo Campos, in aid of the Xocó may be considered the first act by the federal prosecutor in Sergipe under the new constitutional formation of that office as independent of the three branches of government. Out from under the executive and judicial branches, it began to defend the rights of Indians and minorities, the environment, and the landless. Evaldo Campos later became a politician and served as city councilman in Aracaju in the 1990s.

⁹⁷ João Pacheco de Oliveira Filho, *Atlas das Terras Indígenas do Nordeste, Projeto Estudo sobre Terras Indígenas no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Museu Nacional/UFRJ, 1993).

⁹⁸ Magno da Silva, *Conflitos De Terra E Reforma Agrária Em Sergipe*, pp. 41-46. The 1990s saw a doubling of land conflicts with approximately 46 occupations, 32 of which were by MST; in 2001, there were 56 occupations, with 47 by MST (Eliano Sérgio Azevedo Lopes, “História dos Movimentos Sociais no Campo em Sergipe (Uma Abordagem Preliminar).” Mimeo. Aracaju, 2002).

⁹⁹ Della Cava, “The ‘People’s Church,’ the Vatican, and Abertura,” pp. 159, 148.

human rights abuses, aided many political prisoners, and labored to protect the Church's interests."¹⁰⁰ The trust he had developed with the military leaders "allowed him to point out the errors of the regime, albeit usually behind the scenes."¹⁰¹ He "favored dialogue but not 'alliance'."¹⁰² Serbin's profile of Dom Eugênio focuses on his disagreements with military leaders, his aid to priests and others imprisoned or threatened, and defense of human rights to political refugees.¹⁰³ In thinking about Dom Eugênio's assistant, Dom Lessa, who was dispatched to the Propriá diocese, I find it useful to adopt Serbin's admonition that "greater attention" should be paid "to personal and historical factors" that shape individual bishops' politics, pointing out "the interpretive limits of the categories 'progressive' and 'conservative'."¹⁰⁴

Dom Lessa, though not a student of liberation theology, continued to support priests who were involved with land struggles and aiding the poor. His official position was that agrarian reform was "an absolute priority," and that it was "not possible that lands of Brazil should end up in the hands of the wealthy that don't want land to work but simply as a form of business," and that the rural poor "must not be forced to surrender to the smooth talk or threats of their adversaries that are the 'land barons' in this large Brazil with all of its space."¹⁰⁵ One of his early decisions was to institutionalize the CPT in Sergipe by contracting with a congregation of nuns from Minas Gerais and bringing into the fold a former nun from Rio Grande do Sul to coordinate and complement those already working with squatters and land claims on behalf of the Church. As Frei Enoque has explained Dom Lessa's arrival, "there weren't changes in the way things were done: he continued giving support [to land struggles], but . . . he made things smoother; he wanted something more negotiated."¹⁰⁶ Dom Lessa's arrival heralded a change in the nature of the diocese's involvement in land struggles. However, the nature of those struggles was already changing. Over the 1990s, the number of land conflicts more than doubled, largely attributable to the work of the MST, which had the support of Frei Enoque, by that time mayor of Poço Redondo.

¹⁰⁰ Serbin, *Secret Dialogues*, p. 12.

¹⁰¹ Serbin, *Secret Dialogues*, p. 12.

¹⁰² Serbin, *Secret Dialogues*, p. 12.

¹⁰³ Serbin, *Secret Dialogues*, pp. 66, 167.

¹⁰⁴ Serbin, *Secret Dialogues*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ "A Defesa (December 1987)." *Orgão Oficial da Diocese de Propriá 3a fase*, no. No. 742 (1987), as cited in Marta Vieira Cruz, "Igreja Católica e Sindicato no Campo: Conservadorismo ou Transformação? (1975-1985)." Ph.D., Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, 1992, p. 132.

¹⁰⁶ Enoque Salvador de Melo, Interview by Maria Neide Sobral da Silva.

PADRE ISAÍAS AND MOCAMBO'S FUGITIVE SLAVE HERITAGE:
ANOTHER LAND STRUGGLE

In June 1990, Dom Lessa ordained a new priest fresh from Dom Hélder's Theological Institute, where the priest had studied theology for four years, exactly 20 years after Frei Enoque had been a student there. Padre Isaías Nascimento was born in the interior of Sergipe, the 41st child of 43 children of his father and the 11th of his mother (his father's fourth wife had 13 children; his father was 44 years older than his mother), and came with his family to Aracaju when he was sixteen to escape the drought of 1970 (see figure 5). Padre Isaías sees himself as a student of the struggles in play at the time of his days as a deacon and almost five years as parish priest of Porto da Folha, a position he took over from Frei Enoque.¹⁰⁷ Dedicated to liberation theology doctrine, Padre Isaías began to visit outlying communities in the county, one of which, Mocambo, was suffering from lack of work and food.¹⁰⁸ Over the next few years, the neighboring Xocó Indians, most of who are related to people in Mocambo, won their battle for Caiçara. Some say with the support of the Xocó, although it may have been as much in competition with them for more land, a number of Mocambo families entered into conflict with the landowners who held property on the border between Mocambo and Caiçara. When Padre Isaías learned of the conflict in 1992, he called upon the CPT, with its nun lawyer, Mariza Rios, former nun, Inês dos Santos Souza, and a lay religious worker, Margarette Lisboa Rocha, to help mobilize the Mocambo families and provide them with legal assistance.¹⁰⁹

Sister Mariza Rios was born to a poor family in the south central state of Espírito Santo in 1958, the youngest of nine children. In my interview with her, Mariza identified herself as "a real Brazilian." Her mother, she was quick to explain, was the daughter of a Portuguese and an Italian; while her father was the son of a black-Indian man and a Guarani woman. She claimed that her father's grandfather was African, as they say, "he came on

¹⁰⁷ Padre Isaías Carlos Nascimento Filho, Interview by author (Propriá, Sergipe, August 4, 2000).

¹⁰⁸ Frei Enoque, when parish priest of Porto da Folha, had tried to convince Mocambo to change its saint's day festival. He wanted them to stop taking money from politicians and landowners and to restrict the times of the dances to before the mass and after the procession. When the people in Mocambo refused, Frei Enoque stopped going there to say mass for four years (1986-1990) (José Maurício Andion Arruti, "'Étnias Federais': O Processo de Identificação de 'Remanescentes' Indígenas e Quilombolas no Baixo São Francisco." Ph.D., UFRJ, 2002, p. 280).

¹⁰⁹ Two years earlier, Mariza had been called upon by Frei Enoque and Padre Isaías to help the Xocó in their land bid, which she said she could not do for lack of legal experience with indigenous law. At that time, she said and Isaías confirmed, the scene in Mocambo was depressing with men sitting in front of their houses drinking, without prospects, dependent on government assistance during election times. Interview by author with Rios, Mariza. Colatina, Espírito Santo, 20 May 2000.

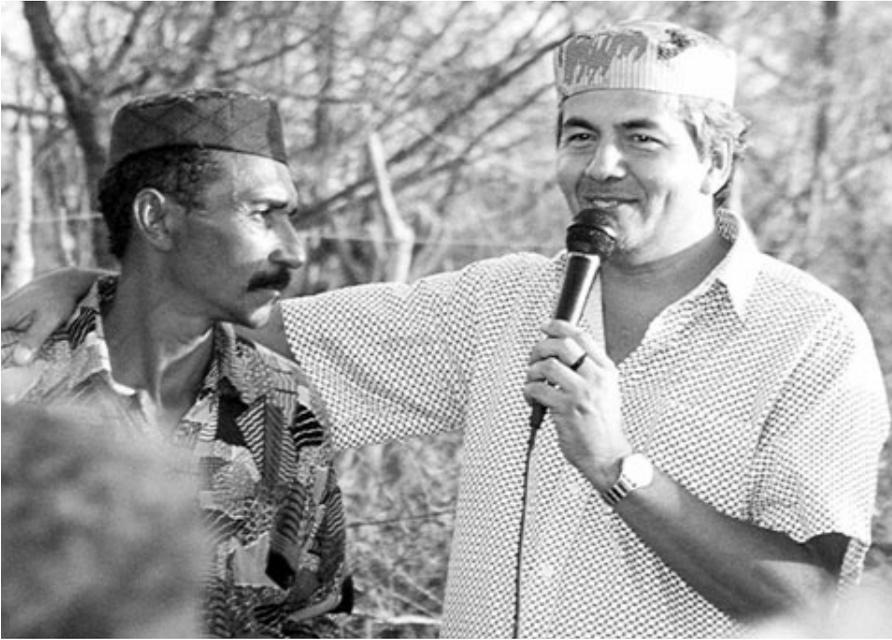


Figure 5: Padre Isaías Nascimento, photograph by Jan Hoffman French (November 2000). Padre Isaías Nascimento (right) at the Black Consciousness Day celebration with Maripaulo Acácio dos Santos, a leader of the *quilombo* movement in Mocambo, November 2000.

a boat from Africa.” “I am a descendent of Africa,” she elucidated. In the Brazilian manner of constant, never-tiring amazement at the tricks that genetics play on skin, hair, nose, and body type, Mariza explained that because of the combination of her ancestors, she has blond, white siblings, while she herself leans more toward the black and indigenous side. After returning from a stint as a nanny at the age of eleven in a nearby city while she attended school, Mariza worked in a shoe factory during the day and attended high school at night. In her teens, she became involved with a youth group run by a congregation of nuns, and when she reached 21 she took her vows. After two years as a missionary raising the consciousness of onion workers in the interior of Bahia, she went to Rio to study law. While in Sergipe, Mariza kept in touch with law professors in Rio with whom she had worked on law courses in poor neighborhoods. She found their advice invaluable when she was unsure of legal tactics.¹¹⁰ Mariza tapped these resources when, at a regional meeting of the CPT in Bahia, she first heard

¹¹⁰ Mariza Rios, Interview by author (Colatina, Espírito Santo, May 20, 2000).

of a provision in the 1988 Constitution that mandates that land title be given to recognized remnants of quilombos communities.¹¹¹

Over the following five years, the Mocambo families who had been involved in the original land conflict, together with Sister Mariza, Padre Isaías, and the CPT cadre, mobilized about two-thirds of the village to pursue multiple strategies to become owners of the land on which they had worked for generations.¹¹² Represented by Mariza and the CPT, they filed a labor claim against the neighboring land owner with whom they were in conflict, claimed her land through agrarian reform law, and they filed a claim as a quilombo. They also filed for use of the margin of the interstate São Francisco River, which is considered property of the federal government. The land they claimed under the Quilombo Clause extended well beyond the piece they requested under agrarian reform law. They laid claim to the large ranch of João de Seixas Dória, former governor of Sergipe, a proponent of land reform who was elected in 1963 and arrested on the day of the military coup, the day after he took office.¹¹³ After five years of visits by officials of the Palmares Cultural Foundation (under the aegis of the Ministry of Culture), anthropologists, black movement activists, and constant assistance from the Propriá diocese through Padre Isaías, Sister Mariza, Inês, and Margarete, the village of Mocambo was recognized as a quilombo and in 2000 the Mocambo families were granted title to all the land they claimed.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Transitory Article 68 provides: “Aos remanescentes das comunidades dos quilombos que estejam ocupando suas terras é reconhecida a propriedade definitiva, devendo o Estado emitir os títulos respectivos.” The reason it was placed in the transitory section at the end of the Constitution was because the Constituent Assembly assumed that there were not very many quilombos and that all would be identified and taken care of within just a few years—in 2005, over 2,200 quilombos have been identified and as will be seen below, the process has taken on a life of its own not to end any time soon.

¹¹² Approximately one-third of Mocambo was opposed to pursuing quilombo status—a complicated dance of family feuds and local political intrigue. The split has been exacerbated by the influx of a foreman of the Brittos and his family when their small landholdings were expropriated for the Xocó indigenous reserve in 1991. See French, *The Rewards of Resistance*.

¹¹³ Seixas Dória spent a year on Fernando de Noronha island with Miguel Arrães, governor of Pernambuco, and in 1998 still counted Arrães as one of his best friends (João de Seixas Dória, Interview by author, Aracaju, Sergipe, May 26, 1998).

¹¹⁴ Title to the land was given by the Palmares Cultural Foundation to the association of Mocambo residents that had been formed by Mariza expressly for the purpose of holding the land. Granting of title did not end their problems, however. Due to the haziness of the legal status of quilombo land, there had been no provision for expropriating landowners whose land was being taken on the theory that the quilombolas had been there prior to any other landowner. Another difficulty was the conflict provoked between the Palmares Foundation and INCRA (the national land reform agency). This has led to presidential decrees (by both Cardoso and Lula) attempting to resolve the problems. The current decree shifts responsibility for land issues to INCRA and allows communities to be recognized without expert reports by anthropologists—self-identification by rural black communities is the only requirement for recognition (Decree 4887 of November 20, 2003).

During the eight years of the Mocambo struggle for land (1992-2000), Frei Enoque, Padre Isaías, and the CPT went through a series of changes that reflected the political transformations taking place on the national and local scenes, both in terms of democratization and its consolidation and in terms of struggles within the Brazilian Church as Pope John Paul II and many of his appointments discouraged the practice of liberation theology doctrine. The CPT in the Propriá diocese and the militant rural workers involved in land struggles found themselves disappointed that bishop Dom Lessa did not participate in the struggles the way Dom José Brandão had done. Dom Lessa was distressed by the overt criticisms being made of him, believed strongly that they were unfair, and after some disagreements over lines of authority with Mariza, he cancelled the diocese's contract with Mariza's congregation in 1994. As a result, when the local CPT transformed itself into a secular nongovernmental organization in 1995 to support rural workers in their disputes with landowners, the militant rural workers who had been involved with the CPT insisted that the new organization be named Centro Dom José Brandão de Castro in honor of "their" bishop. In this way, and into the next decade, even though the Centro was technically secular, liberation theology was crucial to its practice, in its educational activities and in the way that religiosity and spirituality infused its work and many of its events.

Around the time that the Centro was formed, Padre Isaías, who had been the priest for Porto da Folha for almost five years, found himself under stress from those years of constant land conflicts around his parish which had drawn violent confrontations with police and gunmen. He agreed to go to Italy to study, but after a short period decided that the rural poor of Sergipe needed him more than he needed further education, so he returned to Sergipe at the end of 1995.¹¹⁵ This was just in time for him to join the PT and run for mayor of Porto da Folha, losing by only 600 votes (Porto da Folha has a population of about 30,000).¹¹⁶ That same year, Frei Enoque ran for mayor of Poço Redondo on the ticket of one of the parties allied with the state government and won.¹¹⁷ While Padre Isaías was away, Dom Lessa had been promoted to archbishop of Aracaju and the diocese of Propriá acquired a new bishop, Dom Mário Rino Sivieri, an Italian. Dom Mário convinced Padre Isaías that he could continue his work most effectively within the Church and Isaías agreed to become the parish priest of Poço Redondo when Frei

¹¹⁵ Padre Isaías Carlos Nascimento Filho, interview by author.

¹¹⁶ Brazilian Health Department, <http://portal.saude.gov.br/saude/>, accessed July 11, 2006.

¹¹⁷ Frei Enoque completed his second term as mayor of Poço Redondo at the end of 2004. Some say that Frei Enoque's ties to the state government were instrumental in allowing the MST to succeed in establishing settlements in Poço Redondo.

Enoque became mayor. They coexisted well, despite their political differences and rivalry, with Padre Isaías complaining of Frei Enoque's personalistic and "autocratic" manner.¹¹⁸ While in his post as priest of Poço Redondo, Padre Isaías ran unsuccessfully for state deputy, again on the PT ticket. Although many bishops in Brazil discourage participation by priests in party politics, it is neither prohibited nor uncommon.¹¹⁹ In fact, a number of radical priests and Church figures considered "representatives of liberation theology" have served in the Lula government.¹²⁰

LIBERATION THEOLOGY AT THE INTERSECTION OF STRUGGLE, FAITH,
AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

Through the prism of the stories of Frei Enoque and Padre Isaías and the seminal, perhaps defining, struggles of their politico-religious lives, it is possible to catch a glimpse of how liberation theology survives in a period of retrenchment enforced by central Church authorities. Unlike most of the literature that describes the "failed" experiment of liberationist practice through analyses of CEBs in urban areas, this article has concentrated on a rural setting in the northeastern backlands over a span of three decades.¹²¹ Considering the role of the Church in such a different local setting is intended to open up the discussion and broaden our understanding of the ways in which liberation theology continues to influence modes of struggle and spirituality. With the development of its support for indigenous people and quilombo communities in addition to its traditional focus on non-identitarian peasant movements, pastoral agents have helped structure alternatives to CEBs that have permitted the Church to span its shift from opposition to a military government in the 1970s to a partnership with a democratic government in the twenty-first century. As evidenced by constitutional pro-

¹¹⁸ Padre Isaías Carlos Nascimento Filho, interview by author.

¹¹⁹ In May 2004, a meeting was held in Garanhuns, Pernambuco, of priests that are mayors and state deputies, including Frei Enoque ("Padres desafiam bispos e participam da política," *Correio Sete Colinas*, May 8, 2004).

¹²⁰ Some of these figures are Frei Betto, Bispo Tomás Balduino (head of the CPT), and Dom Mauro Morelli (Roldão Arruda, "Planalto abre vagas para radicais da Igreja," *O Estado de São Paulo*, February 23, 2003). This article, which quotes Frei Enoque, also discusses the influence of the CPT and CIMI in the Lula government.

¹²¹ Ottmann regrets the institutionalization of liberation theology doctrine in the urban peripheral communities of São Paulo where he did his fieldwork: "After it became clear that the Church's option for the poor was indeed only preferential, the term was increasingly felt to represent an imposition by a hierarchy claiming a base it was no longer representing." Ottmann, *Lost for Words*, p. 82. However, even with his pessimism regarding such institutionalization, Ottmann ends his book with an optimistic view of the São Paulo hip hop genre when he reports that "liberationism has become the underlying taken-for-granted cultural fabric in many a *bairro* in the periphery. Hip-hop militants revitalize a liberationist mode of action that has become part of the repertoire of secular popular dissent." Ottmann, *Lost for Words*, p. 179.

visions, promulgated in 1988, granting increased rights to, and protection of, indigenous peoples, promising land to descendants of quilombo communities, and criminalizing racist behavior, to name a few, the newly democratized Brazilian government prides itself on pluralism, multiculturalism, and support of the worldwide trend toward the identity politics of liberation.

In addition to the “legacies” of liberation theology evident in certain social movements discussed by Burdick (MST, black pastoral, women), political scientist Frances Hagopian indicates a more direct influence on works of the Church:

[T]he Brazilian Episcopate has sustained numerous social Pastoral Commissions serving workers, the landless, the indigenous, ‘marginalized women,’ the homeless, and those suffering from AIDS, and it has launched visible campaigns to educate voters about the electoral programs and commitments to the poor of political parties. In the late 1990s, its Pastoral Commission on Justice and Peace mobilized 60 organizations in 15 months to collect the requisite one million signatures to sponsor citizen’s legislation to prohibit the practice of clientelism, a campaign that culminated in the passage of Law 9840/99 that made buying votes by a candidate to public office a crime.¹²²

A bit closer to the histories told in this article is the “link between liberation theology and indigenous mobilization” and the “role of religion as an antecedent to indigenous movements.”¹²³ This article shows that the same strands of liberation theology can be traced for the quilombo movement in Brazil. With the rise of “new historical subjects,”¹²⁴ pastoral agents who adhere to liberationist doctrine and practice have become sensitive to the relationship between poverty and discrimination. From the side of the subjects, we can also see the consolidation of faith through ethnic identification, leading to the conclusion that the assumption of ethnic identities is not simply pragmatic, but is considered by many of the Indians and quilombolas as the fulfillment of a religious commitment. In fact, what is often missing from analyses of the surge of new ethnoracial identification in Latin America is the role of the liberationist Church in the story of identity reconfiguration and empowerment.

¹²² Frances Hagopian, “Latin American Catholicism in an Age of Religious and Political Pluralism: A Framework for Analysis,” Paper presented at the conference on Contemporary Catholicism, Religious Pluralism, and Democracy in Latin America: Challenges, Responses, and Impact, Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies, University of Notre Dame (Notre Dame, IN, March 31-April 1, 2005), p. 7.

¹²³ Edward L. Cleary, and Timothy J. Steigenga, “Resurgent Voices: Indians, Politics, and Religion in Latin America,” in *Resurgent Voices in Latin America: Indigenous Peoples, Political Mobilization, and Religious Change*, eds. Edward L. Cleary and Timothy J. Steigenga (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004), pp. 11, 16.

¹²⁴ Gómez de Souza, “As Várias Faces da Igreja Católica,” p. 89.

This is not particularly surprising, since both Indian and rural black community demands often stem directly from land struggles, which bear the unmistakable mark of the inextricable tie, today and historically, between liberationist Catholicism and land reform. In fact, the institutional Church itself is invested in promoting the fair distribution of land, especially in the Third World.¹²⁵ It is quite likely that one conclusion to be drawn from the story told in this article of the diocese of Propriá is that places with a history of land struggle are also places where liberation theology remains vibrant and influential. Histories of successful land struggles reinforce belief systems that posit a spiritual connection between land, people, and God.¹²⁶

Finally, another way of broadening our view of liberation theology and its practical implications at the end of the twentieth century beyond the CEB model is by recalling the flexibility of the Catholic Church in its inclusion of adherents whose primary connection is through folk Catholic practices, such as pilgrimages to shrines of “saints” such as Padre Cícero, and beliefs in the powers of patron saints and prayer healing. This “polyphonic composition of Brazilian religiosity”¹²⁷ is mirrored in how members of the Mocambo community, for example, involve themselves with aspects of the

¹²⁵ See the Technical Note from the Holy See when a representative from the Vatican participated in the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (Porto Alegre, 6-10 March 2006) at http://www.ncrlc.com/AgrarianReformHOLY_SEE.html, accessed July 12, 2006, and the statement from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, “Towards a Better Distribution of Land: The Challenge of Agrarian Reform” (1997), which opens with the following:

The intent of the present document . . . is to increase and quicken awareness of the dramatic human, social and ethical problems caused by the phenomenon of the concentration and misappropriation of land. These problems affect the dignity of millions of persons and deprive the world of the possibility of peace. Because such situations are characterized by countless unacceptable injustices, the Pontifical Council . . . is offering this document for reflection and guidance . . . about the scandalous situations of property and land use, present on almost all continents. Drawing its inspiration from the rich patrimony of the social doctrine of the Church, the Pontifical Council . . . considers it a pressing duty to remind all, above all those with political and economic responsibilities, to undertake appropriate agrarian reforms in order to set in motion a period of growth and development. There is not a moment to lose. The Great Jubilee of the year 2000, proclaimed by the Holy Father John Paul II in remembrance of our only Saviour, Jesus Christ, is a challenging call to conversion, including in the social and political fields, that will re-establish the right of the poor and marginalized to enjoy the use of the land and its goods that the Lord has given to all and to each one of his sons and daughters.

¹²⁶ See for example Adriance, *Promised Land*; Madeleine Adriance, “Base Communities and Rural Mobilization in Northern Brazil,” in *Religion & Democracy in Latin America*, ed. William H. Swatos (New Brunswick, N.J., U.S.A.: Transaction Publishers, 1995), pp. 59-74.

¹²⁷ Rubem Fernandes, “Santos e Agentes—das dificuldades e da possibilidade de uma comunicação entre eles,” Paper presented in the Colóquio Franco-Brasileiro em Ciências Sociais, Paris, April 27-30, 1989, as quoted in Vázquez, *The Brazilian Popular Church and the Crisis of Modernity*, p. 271. This is a theme that resonates with Alberto Antoniazzi’s analysis of the 2000 census, in which he points out that many Brazilians “consciously practice more than one religion simultaneously.” Alberto Antoniazzi, “As Religiões no Brasil segundo o Censo de 2000,” *Revista de Estudos da Religião* 3:2 (2003), p. 77.

liberation theology perspective of the priests, bishops, and the diocese. Members of the community who have led the quilombo movement participate in Freirian educational processes brought by liberation theology practitioners while enjoying charismatic singing priests on television, leading the local Legion of Mary (a pre-Vatican Council II movement), and making the 14-hour trip to the shrine of Padre Cícero each year. In this regard, it is crucial not to limit our inquiry to searching for “purity” in belief and liturgical structures in the northeastern backlands. Thales de Azevedo’s observations half a century ago are still applicable today. He noted that Catholicism in the backlands is “a religion of saints, not so much of sacraments.” There, “saints don’t function so much as examples of a moral life, but as patrons of a religious form that corresponds to those that struggle daily for survival, making their free choice among religious themes.” In the backlands, liturgical prescriptions are translated into “novenas and orations, pilgrimages to sanctuaries where popular images are revered; with curiosities associated with magical practices.”¹²⁸ In places like Mocambo and among the Xocó Indians, liberation theology has found resonance with these popular forms of religiosity, fertile ground for the belief that religious salvation is linked to the struggle for a just society.

CONCLUSION

The continuing use of “preferential option for the poor” on the website of the Propriá diocese and its support of priests such as Padre Isaías, as well as bishop Dom Mário’s representation of the Church on the regional committee to save the lower São Francisco River from plans to divert it to other northeastern states, provide evidence that the influence of liberation theology doctrine and practice is not simply about a “legacy” of Medellín and Puebla. Indigenous rights and land for the poor remain integral to the Brazilian Church’s identity and activities in these places.¹²⁹ Moreover, through the discourse and practice of even secular organizations, such as the Centro Dom José Brandão de Castro, it is possible to perceive, as Goetz Frank Ottmann observes, that “liberationist pastoral practice inspired by liberationist thought continues to give rise to new initiatives that transform and renovate the symbolic universe of struggle.”¹³⁰ When we recount the stories of successive generations of pastoral agents implementing a version of prac-

¹²⁸ Thales de Azevedo, *O Catolicismo No Brasil: Um Campo Para a Pesquisa Social* (Salvador: Edufba, 2002 [1955]), p. 36.

¹²⁹ “A Igreja no Contexto Nacional e Internacional,” Grupo de Conjuntura No. 41, Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro, 1991.

¹³⁰ Ottman, *Lost for Words*, p. 2.

tices associated with liberation theology—focusing on the poor, landless, and dispossessed; “accompanying” movements and struggles that are led by the people themselves; infusing political action with religiosity and spiritual life—we are able to see how, for example, relationships between bishops and priests can have greater importance at moments of increased repression and play a smaller role in a democratic, freer environment where priests are able to act more independently.

After Padre Isaías lost the election in 1998, he was offered the social pastoral of the diocese and accepted the post, along with a position as priest of a parish near the São Francisco River. He has continued his political activities, as has Frei Enoque, each involved in different causes—Isaías working to save the São Francisco River and Enoque working to support the landless in Poço Redondo and find sustenance for that poorest of counties. Frei Enoque and his colleague Frei Roberto Eufrásio de Oliveira (who lived in the mission house in Porto da Folha in the early years when Frei Enoque was visiting the people who would become the Xocó) have established the Association of Missionaries of the Northeast (fifty members spread from Bahia to Ceará) following the precepts of liberation theology.¹³¹ Moreover, when a priest who had been assigned to Porto da Folha was exacerbating the feud in Mocambo between those for and against quilombo recognition, the bishop reassigned him to another parish and brought in a priest who is wholly supportive of the quilombo enterprise and works closely with Padre Isaías.

The diocese continues to support the Xocó and Mocambo, materially through agricultural technical training projects and spiritually through land pilgrimages, patron saint festivals tied to new ethnic identities, and Black Consciousness Day celebrations. As I witnessed ostensibly secular events such as the commemoration by the Centro Dom José Brandão de Castro of Dom José’s birthday (after his death in 1999), Black Consciousness Day in Mocambo, and even election day, it occurred to me that liberation theology and liberationist struggle is not only about injecting progressive politics into religion, but is also about infusing political action with faith and spirituality. That connection remains unbroken for these backland peasants whose religious practices have become tied to their political activities, ethnic identification, and struggles for land and survival.

University of Richmond
Richmond, Virginia

JAN HOFFMAN FRENCH

¹³¹ Enoque Salvador de Melo and Roberto Eufrásio de Oliveira, “Uma Experiência Missionária no Nordeste do Brasil,” *Revista Mundo e Missão*, 42 (2000), p. 38.