

The Press—A Political Gospel?

Maria Manuela Tavares Ribeiro

Abstract. Manuela Tavares Ribeiro examines the borrowing from a religious/redemptive discourse to express political and social issues in pamphlets that circulated during the 1840s and 1850s in Portugal. This essay shows how this parallel, and often radical, press, in the form of pamphlets and tracts, represented a key means of sharing public opinions and disseminating political and social propaganda, through the widely intelligible message of religious paradigms and language, forming an early expression of Christian Socialism.

In 1851, in the *Revista Portugal*, the journalist João Bernardo da Rocha refers to the periodical press as “a moral necessity for all states” and adds: “it is a true political Gospel” (n.p.). In various European countries—France, Italy, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Spain and Portugal—where revolutionary movements fuelled nationalist and Republican fervor in the mid-nineteenth century, the press was—and continued to be—a political weapon and the favored means of shaping public opinion. The words of António Pedro Lopes de Mendonça, journalist and essayist, are particularly relevant in this respect. In the prologue to *Poesias* by Luís Augusto Palmeirim he wrote: “If revolutions bring to fruition the fate of a people, it is the press, the labor of thought that hastens these glorious manifestations of the human spirit”¹ (Ribeiro, 1974: 99 and 1987: 413). It is not surprising, therefore, that in the

1840s, and particularly during the time of the oligarchic and centrist policies of António Bernardo da Costa Cabral (1842-1851), especially given the impact of Nationalist and Republican movements, the spread of utopian doctrines (Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen, Cabet, Pierre Leroux) and, above all, the establishment of the Second Republic in France on February 24, 1848—that many liberals in Portugal, who were also Republican and socialist utopians, some more progressive than others, published leaflets, tracts, proclamations and short-lived broadsheets which circulated anonymously and clandestinely. In other words, the mid-nineteenth century saw the co-existence of three contemporary presses: 1) an official governmental press; 2) a private, factional press; and 3) a more radical press that voiced principles and doctrines but also inflammatory criticisms in the name of the Republic, Equality and Fraternity.

Literary and political pamphlets flowed from the pens of António Pedro Lopes de Mendonça, João de Aboim and João Carlos Massa, amongst others who, in the words of Bulhão Pato, “fired bolts of lightening” (356). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Portuguese authorities attempted to halt the spread of these “incendiary broadsheets” (Bulhão Pato 356) through restrictive legislation and stern vigilance. People frequently informed the district and municipal authorities, and periodicals and leaflets were seized on a regular basis. There were also many court cases involving abuse of the freedom of the press, despite all the tricks and deceptions that were employed in an attempt to evade this vigilante and unremitting surveillance. The truth was, as Cormenin affirmed, when the newspapers do not appear, the pamphlets still circulate.²

This literary explosion reflected the vibrancy of ideas and also underlined the fervor and faith of men who, in the name of Social Justice, Universal Brotherhood, the Republic and Democracy, were involved in the incessant quest for human happiness.

Universality and Ecumenism

The social question became particularly important in the 1830s and 40s. Workers' movements were organized and working people became more aware of their essential problems, taking the first steps towards political emancipation by calling for universal suffrage, the establishment of the Republic, the organization and division of labor and the right to form associations.

Both the periodical and the pamphlet press reflected these social and

political principles. They denounced social injustices and propounded utopian ideals, the ideals of social Romanticism itself. Social Romanticism strengthened a religious faith fused with nostalgia for evangelical primitivism and humanitarianism. It also bore the indelible marks of the messianic discourse of the utopian socialist. Social Christianity, representing the interaction between the divine and the human, was a new synthesis.

Theology was thus re-launched from new, cosmotheological foundations. The eschatological basis of the future of mankind lay in the triumphant expectation of democracy. And Romantics, as so many Democrat-Republicans and utopians were, cherished a faith and hope in this "divine" future. Christ/the People would announce liberation through the Advent of Democracy.

The founding principles of Christianity were the same as those on which Republican and socialist ideologies were based: equality, fraternity, justice and solidarity. This religious syncretism is also characteristic of the Romantic consciousness. Like democracy, it was compounded with the purest of evangelical primitivism and the basic principles of Christology. The Christianity/Revolution symbiosis underpinned the ideology of revolutionary movements in the 40s and, in particular, in 1848. Thus France was heralded by Michelet and Edgar Quinet as the new Messiah. Republican, democratic France was the paradigm for old and new nations alike. Nations were to be saved by the Republic—a righteous Republic, a Republic that promoted evangelical principles or, in other words, the revolutionary trinity of *Liberty*, signifying patriotism, *Equality*, synonymous with Union of Mankind and *Fraternity* embodied in the message of the "*sans-culotte Jesus*" (as commonly expressed during the French Revolution, and more particularly in 1848 as a form of sacrilege language). These were the foundations of a new religion—a Religion of Mankind. It was a true revolutionary creed, the *anima* of the Republican faith, which moved the anonymous and collective believer—the People.

A Messianic halo surrounded the People. Tortured like Christ, they were the embodiment of Humanity. As the Word made flesh, the People, i.e. Humanity, proclaimed justice, truth and fraternity which, in practice, co-existed with the establishment of the Republic (considered by many to be a Social Republic), universal suffrage, the abolition of slavery and the death penalty, the right to work, the right of free association, better living conditions, fair wages and the full right to all liberties and individual guarantees.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the bourgeois, clerical and individualist society—the unjust oppressor—was nevertheless fertile ground for the idealism

of the Romantics and utopians, including socialists, Republicans and workers.

Their messianic and prophetic discourse and vast social literature concentrated on two essential areas: the return of the *kingdom of heaven*, as the gospels and the primitive church had proclaimed, and the building of this kingdom on earth, which was always projected into the future.³

Revolution/Religion

In addition to the inspiration that came from revolutionary ideas and movements, this underlying, and at times very explicit, identification of Religion/the Republic, the People/Christ, and France/the Redeemer could be found in the many liberal, democratic and Republican propaganda leaflets and pamphlets circulating anonymously and clandestinely in Portugal, particularly in 1848 after the victory of the Republican Revolution in France.

A few relevant examples from these texts will serve to illustrate how they reflected the anti-monarchist and Republican political struggle, the socio-economic battle for justice, equality and fraternity and the importance of education, instruction and the shaping of public opinion. The pamphlet press was, above all, a didactic medium and a "weapon of political propaganda and means of shaping public opinion" (Vargues 449).⁴ For its ideas to be more easily understood in societies such as the Portuguese where, in the mid-nineteenth century, there was still a high rate of illiteracy, the language and vocabulary was deliberately infused with mystical-religious expressionism, as had also been the case during the *triénio vintista* period (1820-23) and during other periods of fervent political debate, since this was better suited to the general, and deeply Catholic, mentality. This use of sacred language paralleled a growing movement towards a secular society.

Let us consider a few examples from the many pamphlet-style publications. In the tract *O soldado e o povo* ("The soldier and the people") a young lawyer, politician and journalist of the time, José Maria do Casal Ribeiro, identifies the Christian symbol of the Holy Cross with the flag of liberty—the cross of the Savior (23). The symbolic identification of the suffering of humanity with the crucified Christ, which was very explicit in Lamennais' work *Paroles d'un croyant* ("Words of a believer" -1834) is also very clear in the tract of the utopian socialist Custódio José Vieira:

[...] through cunning, tyranny and theft, the wretched are stripped of the few possessions they own. [...] The proletariat is the image of Christ crucified. The

word proletarian signifies unhappiness and endurance... [but] if we look to the horizon, beyond the Pyrenees, to the star that proclaims the future of the people—it is the star of their redemption. (16)

The tortured, suffering and crucified Christ was the perfect image for the proletariat, martyred by social and economic injustice. However, the image of the risen Christ, the collective Christ—the People—was based on Salvation. Therefore, the collective liberation of the oppressed, despite the messianic vocabulary—*liberation, emancipation, salvation*—clearly had a secular meaning. Redemption was to be the work of the People themselves, meaning that, in the liturgy of these utopian authors, it was Self-Redemption. As the clandestine broadsheet *A República* says: “No People who desire to be free may not be so” (nº.5, 16-5-1848: 4). *O Republicano* adds: “A vast and profound revolution shall appear on earth [...] for this revolution shall be made by the people, for the people” (nº.4, 1848: 1). Representing liberation from the yoke of tyranny and political dictatorship and from oligarchic and capitalist oppression, the Revolution and, for some of the more radical writers, the armed revolution was justified as the legitimate means of achieving this longed-for Redemption. And this, in its consummate form, was the Republic. “The Republic—says the leaflet *Deus e a liberdade* (“God and Freedom,” the slogan of Lamennais)—is the realization of the Liberty God granted to Man, the Equality that Christ revealed to the world and the Fraternity that is the expression of his Holy Word” (*Deus e a liberdade* 1).

Christian doctrine, containing ideas of philanthropy and solidarity—concepts cherished by Portuguese Democrat-Republicans and utopian socialists—was the paradigm for the whole set of ideas on which the ideology of ‘48 was based. Therefore Christology and the return to an evangelical primitivism, which was very much to the Romantic taste, experienced a heady revival, translated into a religious language that was at times far from orthodox and, rather than theocentric, was based on a revolutionary Christology. The Gospel was the “charter for the emancipation of social man,” or the “contract between God and the people,” “the revolution of the righteous man” or even “the book of the doctrine of love and fraternity” (as frequently expressed in *A República*, *O Republicano*, etc.). In the same way, the slogans of the democratic Republic were, in the final analysis, the secular translation of Christian precepts. The Republic itself was, therefore, a religion, as Pierre Leroux, amongst others, believed: “The Republic is a Religion or, rather, it is the Religion” (65).

But what kind of Republic? The small, clandestine and strongly Masonic newspaper of the same name—*A Republica*—states “the Republic symbolizes the Great family who are all equal and within which there are no factions (Chartists, Miguelists, Progressives, Cabralists)—only Portuguese people—brothers and equals” (nº.3, 6-5-1848: 3). The Social Republic was more desirable than a change in the political regime. The Republic was felt and believed to be the Kingdom of Justice. “[I]t exists to deliver the people out of the misery in which they live and give them bread, it will protect orphans and widows, it will reward talent and the virtues of hard work [...],” *O Republicano* stated (nº.3, 1848: 2). The practice of tolerance and philanthropy as seen in the parables and the message of the gospels indicated, for some, a pacifist route, influenced by Christian Christology. Confirming this statement, the same clandestine broadsheet says: “The People do not want bloodshed; we must be jealous of spilling it because it is the blood of the Portuguese people, the blood of our brothers” (*O Republicano*, nº.5, 1848: 2).

A repressive God gave way to the God of Love, who had given man the gift of life. The Christocentric vision or, in other words, devotion to Christ and the cult of his sacrifice, the crucifixion, was preferred to the theocentric vision of God the Father.

Christian Socialism

The crucifixion was, in the eyes of the Romantics, socialists and utopian republicans of the mid-nineteenth century, the most emblematic and profound symbol of the social structure.

The life of the Son of God made man was a paradigm for humanity. The origins, life and death of Christ represented a model *par excellence* for human life and existence. Christ/the Messiah, who came from humble origins, lived with ordinary people, and was condemned to an insulting death amongst common men, was the image of the proletariat, of the oppressed, of Humanity shackled by the injustices of capitalist society.

The Redemption, however, presupposed sacrifice, bloodshed and crucifixion. The blood of the crucified Christ redeemed this suffering. Therefore bloodshed had been, and still was, necessary in order to establish Justice. In other words, the blood of religion acquired a social and historical significance.

Hardly surprisingly, this had served the most radical as well as the most conservative as a justification for armed revolution. For some Portuguese socialists and Republicans, the Revolution was also a Crucifixion. The human

blood spilled on the barricades or in war was necessary in order to redeem mankind. The following words from the broadsheet *A Republica* should be read in this sense: "The Revolution is as necessary today as the lifeblood that flows in our veins and everyone feels this need" (nº.1, 25-4-1848: 3). This meant that the sacrifice of the Redeemer was fundamental to the glory of men. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the appeal of the anonymous author of the leaflet *Deus e a liberdade* remained insistent: "Oh my Country! Oh my Country! Why do you not rise to the cry for liberty and for Christianity? Why do you not proclaim to the world—the five shields of my flag are the wounds of Christ who died to save the People. [...] What should you cry? But one thing—the Republic" (*Deus e a liberdade* 67).

The shedding of religious blood meant salvation. Pain was the vital element needed in order to secure love. In this way the Calvary of the barricades was justified since, once the Revolution had proved victorious, it would lead to the resurrection of all men and nations, or rather, Mankind. Underlying this creed and this faith was the philosophy of the future and full realization of Universal Harmony.

This desire for Revolution, synonymous with the Resurrection, therefore had a strong ecumenical element—that of universal redemption. France, the liberator through the Great Revolution of 1789, was the embodiment of the Messiah and Savior. "And who will not follow France in this holy crusade?" one commentator subsequently asked in the radical broadsheet *O Rabecão* (10-3-1848: 1). It was an appeal to young people and soldiers, but above all to youth, on whom the salvation of the country depended. This explains the vehemence of the writer in the broadsheet *A Fraternidade*: "Soldiers! Unite with your brothers in this final effort to free the oppressed and together we shall win glory for saving our nation" (nº.2, 13-5-1848: 4).

The pamphlet press, dealing with Republican and social issues and infused with a Romantic humanist philosophy, also had an underlying creed and faith, namely a Christian socialism that was markedly political and social in character. It encapsulated a faith and hope for the future vitalized by the spirit of the Gospels and the paradigmatic image of Christ the Redeemer that was also distinctly heretical. The pamphlet press, with the clear objective of disseminating political and social propaganda and shaping public opinion, resorted to religious language to make its message more intelligible.

Liberal principles and social and Democratic-Republican doctrines were

spread through Republican catechisms, prayers, litanies, and the anonymous and clandestine broadsheets and pamphlets. This press, as an instrument of change, became strongly revolutionary in character. Through its language, theological concepts and Christian eschatology it acquired a profoundly secular meaning. The Redemption/Revolution was the work of Mankind or, to put it another way, Mankind, through self-realization, would also realize its own God.

Which leaves the question: did the mid nineteenth century Christian philosophical principles underlying the discourse of the socialists and utopian Democrat-Republicans conveyed through the pamphlet press represent, as such, the mythologizing of earthly hopes?⁵

Notes

¹ See Luís Augusto Palmeirim, *Poesias* (Lisboa, 1851); Maria Manuela Tavares Ribeiro, "Antônio Pedro Lopes de Mendonça: a obra e o pensamento," undergraduate diss., U of Coimbra, Faculdade de Letras, 1974, 99, and "A imprensa portuguesa e as revoluções europeias de 1848," *Cultura, filosofia, história* 6 (1987): 413.

² João Maria Nogueira, the Portuguese translator of this work by Cormenin, publishes the Portuguese version in 1848 under the title *Um livrinho para o povo. Três diálogos políticos por Timon, e Conversações de Aldêa*.

³ See Maria Manuela Tavares Ribeiro, "O cristianismo social de 1848," *Revista de história das ideias* 9 (1987): 481-94.

⁴ See also Isabel Nobre Vargues, "A fé política liberal," *Revista de história das ideias* 11 (1989): 257-355; *A aprendizagem da cidadania em Portugal (1820-1823)* (Coimbra: Livraria Minerva, 1997): 246-58; and Maria Manuela Tavares Ribeiro, "Subsídios para a história da liberdade de imprensa. Meados do século XIX," *Boletim do Arquivo da Universidade de Coimbra* VI (1984): 462-593.

⁵ See Maria Manuela Tavares Ribeiro, *Portugal e a Revolução de 1848* (Coimbra, Livraria Minerva, 1990) 218-51 and "A imprensa portuguesa e as revoluções europeias de 1848," *Cultura, filosofia, história* 6 (1987): 413-52.

Works Cited

A Fraternidade. Lisboa, 1848.

A Republica. Jornal do povo. Lisboa, 1848.

Cormenin, Louis Marie de la Haie. *Um livrinho para o povo. Três diálogos políticos por Timon*. Trans. João Maria Nogueira. Lisboa, 1848.

Deus e a liberdade, n.p., n.d.

Leroux, Pierre. *Projet de constitution démocratique et sociale*. Paris, 1848.

O Rabecão. Lisboa, 1848.

O Regenerador. Jornal do povo. Lisboa, 1848.

- O Republicano*. Lisboa, 1848.
- Palmeirim, Luís Augusto. *Poesias*. Lisboa, 1851.
- Pato, Raimundo António de Bulhão. *Memórias. Quadrinhos de outras epochas*. Vol. 3. Lisboa, 1907.
- Revista Portugal*, Lisboa, 1851.
- Ribeiro, José Maria do Casal. *O soldado e o povo*. Coimbra, 1848.
- Ribeiro, Maria Manuela Tavares. "A imprensa portuguesa e as revoluções europeias de 1848." *Cultura, filosofia, história* 6 (1987): 413-52.
- . "O cristianismo social de 1848." *Revista de história das ideias* 9 (1897): 257-355.
- . "Subsídios para a história da liberdade de imprensa. Meados do século XIX." *Boletim do Arquivo da Universidade de Coimbra* VI (1984): 462-593.
- Vargues, Isabel Nobre. *A aprendizagem da cidadania em Portugal (1820-1823)*. Coimbra: Livraria Minerva: 1997.
- . "A fé política liberal." *Revista de história das ideias* 11 (1989): 257-355.
- . "Linguagem religiosa e propaganda política (1820-1823)." *Revista de história das ideias* 9 (1987): 449-79.
- Vieira, Custódio José. *Um, alguns e todos ou a história d'um absurdo*. Porto, 1848.

Maria Manuela Tavares Ribeiro is a lecturer at the Faculdade de Letras of the Universidade de Coimbra and Vice-Coordinator for the Centro de Estudos Interdisciplinares do Século XX at the same institution. Her main areas of current research are the history of ideas, European ideas and Portuguese culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among her publications are the following: *Portugal e a Revolução de 1848* (Coimbra: Minerva História, 1990); *A ideia de Europa. Uma perspectiva história* (Coimbra: Quarteto, 2003); "Livros e leituras no século XX," *Revista de história das ideias* 20 (1999): 187-227; and "A Europa dos intelectuais nos alvares do século XX," *Estudos do século XX* 2, CEIS20 (2002): 111-33. E-mail: mtribeiro@gmx.net