

# TEOLOGIA PÚBLICA: Temos um Longo Caminho a Seguir

## PUBLIC THEOLOGY IN BRAZIL: We Have a Long Way to Go

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### Resumo

Se quisermos dizer algo sobre teologia política, a questão da teologia pública como uma voz a ser requerida e ouvida na sociedade está em jogo. Embora a teologia pública seja muito comum nos países europeus, essa não é a realidade brasileira. Durante muitos anos, a teologia foi uma das disciplinas não reconhecidas pelo Ministério da Educação no país e, devido a isso, somente em 1999 que o curso de bacharelado em teologia foi reconhecido, sendo essa uma das razões pelas quais a teologia não está presente nas universidades públicas do país e não ter caráter público na sociedade brasileira. A teologia da libertação possui grande parte de seus teólogos oriundos do Brasil, tem um forte comprometimento político e alguma interação com a sociedade. Essa comunicação deseja mostrar algumas das características da teologia pública no Brasil e tecer algumas considerações sobre esse importante tema na sociedade brasileira.

**Palavras-chave:** Teologia Pública; Brasil; Neo-pentecostalismo; Teologia da Libertação.

### Abstract

If we want to say something about political theology, the issue of a public theology as a voice required and heard in the society is at stake. Although public theology is a very common in academic discipline in the European countries, this is not a reality in Brazil. During many years, theology was one of the disciplines not recognized by the Ministry of Education and, because of that the bachelor degree in Theology was not granted until 1999. This is one of the reasons why Theology is not present in Public Universities across the country and has no public character in the Brazilian society. The Liberation Theology has some of its major theologians coming from Brazil; it has a strong political commitment and some interaction with society. This paper aims at showing some characteristics of public theology in Brazil and to propose new approaches for such an important matter to Brazilian society

**Keywords:** Public Theology; Brazil; Neo-pentecostalism; Liberation Theology.

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## Public theology in Brazil: an overview

When we talk about public theology in Brazil we have to consider how difficult it is for society and theologians to walk in this field. Unfortunately, there are not so many theologians who work with public theology in Brazil, and, in many cases, there are no disciplines discussing this issue among theology courses in the country.

One could be curious about why public theology is so little studied in a country where Christianity is so common and where Liberation Theology is so present. If one intends to understand this it is important to look back into Brazilian history.

Brazil was a colony from the 1500's to the early 1800's. It was only when Napoleon invaded Portugal that the Portuguese royal family was forced to evade to Brazil, and the country started to receive more attention and infrastructure. For example, the first university was created in the twentieth century, almost a hundred years after the end of the Portuguese Empire.

This new university was largely oriented by positivism, and, as consequence, theology remained totally forgotten for many years. A common saying that still remains is that theology is irrelevant to the nation, and it is only a clergy issue.

With all of that set, it should be no surprise that the bachelor degree in theology was only recognized by the Government in 1999 (CONSELHO NACIONAL DE EDUCAÇÃO. Parecer CES 241/99), even though some post-graduate programs at a high level already existed since 1979. If we look at theology courses in Brazil, almost all of them are offered by private faculties or confessional institutes.

Many new theology courses have requested registration in the Ministry of Education since 1999. After the legal opinion of CES (Council of Higher Education), n. 241/99, three aspects became important to evaluate theology bachelor courses in the country: 1 - the quality of professors (how many of them has granted Master and Doctor degrees); 2 - a good proportion in theological, philosophical, and other disciplines, which would add up to 4 years until the conclusion of the course; 3 - the bibliographical collection quality in the institution's library (ANDRADE, 2011, p. 30).

These new criteria of evaluation have improved the quality of the courses, and, according to Andrade, “there were no criteria that meant laic state interference in religion” (ANDRADE, 2011, p. 31), which used to be a fear of many people from protestant and catholic churches in the country.

The result of all this history is well categorized by Soares and Passos (2011) in a threefold lack of legitimacy: 1- the lack of an epistemological legitimacy inside the academic society, since it is seen as knowledge that only makes sense for the clergymen and it is connected to church political interests, which means a risk to laic and pluralist society; 2 - the lack of political legitimacy, since theology stayed out of universities educational policies for a long time. As mentioned before, it was only in 1999 that the Government legalized bachelor degree in theology. The diversity of Government’s legal opinions put the fragility of theology course as a university course at stake, since they do not took part in the discussion about the epistemological aspect of courses, leaving that for religious confessional parties to evaluate.

At last, the lack of cultural legitimacy, since theology is hardly known by the majority of the population. This scenario calls our attention to the huge detachment between church and society in Brazil. For many Brazilians, theology is only concerned with questions about the church and priests, and it is strange to them to think of a priest who cares and fights for the environment or a priest who is a medical practitioner. It sounds to them as two incompatible things.

As Brazilian society used to put theology as something relevant for the church only, theologians’ voices were not required for important questions involving politics, society, environment, and so on.

## **Neo-pentecostal movements and their hindrance to public theology**

If someone wants to understand how Neo-pentecostal movements arise, he/she must look back at the history of Christianity. With a new form of worldview, influenced by Enlightenment and Rationalism, Modernity starts to put some questions to Christianity, not considering it as a normative religion that determines what is right and what is wrong in society. The emancipation processes that Western Europe has gone through opened a new way of thinking the world and human being within this new framework.

The idea of one dogmatic truth brought by one religion, which claims to be true and above all others started to make no sense for a society that demanded rational facts and proves to believe in something. Christianity has lost its privileged status of being the guardian of the divine secrets and starts to be seen, especially in Europe, as one among others. The Catholic Church's answer given by Vatican I was not dialogical to a large extent. In fact, the documents of this Council show a Church which, in order to defend itself, attacks the new situations of its society. Could it be a reaction to the loss of power among the consciousness that lead the Vatican I to reinforce Trent's proposals and make dogmatic issues even harder? If that is so, could it be that the Catholicism tried to take back its own voice by strength instead of dialogue, closing itself for the newest instead of become like water that flows and open ways wherever there was no way before?

From Protestant side, the answer to this new society comes with the Liberal Theology, which starts with Schleiermacher. This theology, despite the hermetic dogmatism of Catholicism and its subjectivistic bases, would give up from all Scripturistic bases. What is important now is the feeling in the relation with God, i.e., the experience which each one makes of the divine (cf. DREHER, 2001, p. 169-175). It is quite clear that this brings a great relativization of the faith. In this sense, it is interesting to observe that the Protestant answer to the new quests of society, through Liberal Theology, shows as the opposite of Catholicism's answer.

While Vatican I close over it and do not accept the voices that come from outside, Liberal Theology take the risk to lose his identity, negotiating fundamental principles of the Christian faith. The Liberal Theology, in the longing of being something that belongs to its own time, leads Christianity to become an indigent inside the Modern World. Curiously, Barth's answer to this movement leads Christianity to a position closer to the one of Vatican I, in such a way that Christianity looks like a pendulum in the Modern age.

Vatican II opens a new perspective. The aggiornamento proposal brought by it makes theology, whether Catholic, whether Protestant, to try to say itself inside of its own time, since a theology that does not say anything for people of its own time is hardly a voice wanted to be heard. Au contraire, it becomes a silenced voice by society, since it is viewed as something that serves more to lead

back than to move forward in questions demanded by contemporary society

By focus on rationality and historical perspectives, all Modern age is well known as the “forgetting of the Spirit” age in theological field and it is only in the 20th, century that Pneumatology starts to be study again in a more systematic way inside Christian theology.

There was a “revival” of the Spirit quest in Protestant environment, influenced by Pentecostal Movement, which was born in USA, and in the Charismatic Movement in the Catholic environment. Congar’s work *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* could be considered as the highest of the attention that has been given to the Catholic Church to the Spirit quest in our time. However, Congar’s work instead of being a Pneumatology that makes sense to the new societies who live outside the Christendom, in our point of view, only reminds us about the old definitions that occur along the Christian Tradition. By doing so, he developed a Pneumatology that does not touch in the Contemporary quests, such as the inter-religious dialogue.

From the hermeneutical turn of Theology, speaking about faith in categories that make sense for people of our society has become extremely important. It is from inside this proposal, pointed out by Claude Geffré (GEFFRÉ, 1989), that a hermeneutical Pneumatology takes place, which means, make a Pneumatology that can be said and understood by people of our own time and can be a contribution to think many questions of our world

However, there are still many things that make hermeneutical pneumatology so hard to be done in Brazil. If we look at Brazilian Protestant field, it is possible to see that there are many churches that arose from Pentecostal movements. Churches such as Assemblies of God, God is Love, and Foursquare Church can be considered as examples of how the United States have influenced Brazilian churches and, in somehow, have paved the way in which these churches should follow. Even if each of these churches focus on different aspects of Spirit’s action, it is possible to realize some common perspectives among them.

First, the fundamentalist approaches of many Pentecostal churches concerning the literal interpretation of Biblical texts. These churches have considered God’s revelation as something that it is in the text, which was revealed by God in a supernatural way to some people who wrote it. In this sense, what it is written in the Bible has been considered as a fact and not as a narrative that

aim at saying something to a people at some specific moment of their history. Narratives like creation, Noah's ark, or Babel tower are assumed as real facts and the real meaning of these narratives and their lessons for people's daily life are missing.

Second, especially in the second wave of Pentecostal movement, the Spirit has been seen as said by Luke in chapter 10, verse 19: "Look, I have given you authority over all the power of the enemy, and you can walk among snakes and scorpions and crush them. Nothing will injure you" (NVI). In other words, the Spirit has been seen as some divine force, which enables those who have been baptized by Him to heal, release, and to make miracles among the people. However, by focusing on that perspective about the Holy Spirit, in somehow it is possible to realize how it jeopardizes the biblical character of the Spirit as Paraclete and Counselor, as shown in the New Testament.

In our understanding, to consider the Holy Spirit only as a power to heal or some divine force that give superpowers to some chosen ones brings terrible consequences to Protestant theology, since it focuses on personal experiences and some sort of ecstasies moments, which we know that can be easily used by some eloquent preachers to induce people to do their own will by saying that this is God's will.

Neo-pentecostal churches exist in Brazil since the 1970's. These churches originated from Pentecostal movements, and focus on theology of prosperity and "Friends of Job's Theology". In other words, it means that if you give something to God, God will give you something back, if you pay the tithe, God will open the gates of heaven upon you, and so on. This scenario easily gives room to charlatans, who take money from poor people in the name of the Lord, promising them that God will answer them only if they pay something.

In addition to that, there is the huge economic inequality in Brazilian society. According to UN report, in 2017, Brazil is the 10th most unequal country in the World, which makes an easy way for those who want to take money from poor people offering the blessing of the Lord to accomplish this intent.

These false priests have a great contribution in making Brazilian society see theology as something that has only to do with money. It is common in Brazil to say that if one wants to become rich, all he/she has to do is to open a church; an easy and well-paid job to anyone.

It is important to mention that most of those churches also have a fundamentalist agenda. Themes as homosexuality, abortion, drugs and so on are usually doomed, which causes the hate against the minorities to grow. Simultaneously, the political instability that remains after the impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff has made fundamentalist political movements in the country to grow with their agenda of saving the “order” and the “traditional family”.

The link between these political movements and the neo-pentecostal churches is that many of fundamentalist politicians come from those churches, which makes them strength, since most of the votes from churches membership are given in accordance to what their leaders tell them to do.

Because of that, public theology in Brazil has a great hindrance: the legitimacy of theological speech blurred by the neo-pentecostal theology of prosperity and the neo-pentecostal and Pentecostal fundamentalist discourse. As consequence, bringing theology to the popular and academic world is seen by many as an attempt of proselytism. In addition, the attempt of bringing theology to the academy and to political circles brings upon theology the accusation of being something from the left wing in the society, according to the fundamentalist group mentioned before. With that, the gap between theology and society gets bigger and bigger.

## Liberation Theology and Public Theology

Latin American Theology is well-known thanks to Liberation Theology, which was a movement from the 1960's that had the poor as a starting point to try to speak about God. The question: “how to talk about God in a world of miseries?” became a parameter for a rereading of the Bible and of the Church, which greatly changes Christianity around the globe.

With this background set, one could expect that this kind of theology would bring a good contribution to public theology in Brazil. However, this has not happened. Even this does not make this movement small, if we observe the insertion of Liberation Theology in society, as expected from a Christian movement that wanted to reform the society, it is possible to see that it was unable to make an impact on the population. In this sense, the following saying became quite common: “while the Liberation Theology has chosen the poor, the poor has chosen pentecostalism”, according, among others, to Rudolf Von Sinner

(<http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/entrevistas/14220-teologia-publica-seus-espacos-e-seu-papel-entrevista-especial-com-rudolf-von-sinner>).

In Brazil, Leonardo Boff is, maybe, the only theologian who has been recognized as a public theologian and has been requested to be a relevant voice in environmental and political matters. In this sense, even the Liberation theologians are well known among theological congresses in Latin America, they are hardly considered as references in public debates. Their actions are seen most in events organized by churches and in left wing movements. Put in that way, it is possible to say that the Liberation Theology bothers more the Christians than the society. It does not mean a bad thing, however, what is expected is that Liberation Theology leaves its home habitat and shows itself as a voice to be listened to in public situations and in the public affairs, becoming even more necessary to society.

## Conclusion

Public theology in Brazil has a long way to go. Even though the recognition of bachelor degree courses and post-graduation courses in theology is a reality since some decades, the insertion of theology among public universities is still a big claim by Brazilian theologians. At the same time, becoming a voice required to be heard in the society is another claim that poses a great and difficult task to theologians.

Overcoming stereotypes brought by neo-pentecostal movements, to become a discipline among other in university, and getting out from its strongly ecclesial environment are tasks that Brazilian theologians should face if they want theology to be recognized as the knowledge that can contribute to society, and at the same time that society wants to hear them when difficult questions arise.

Bearing that in mind, international agreements, especially academicals, must continue between theology schools around the world and in the country. These actions can contribute to the exchange of experiences and the know-how about theology insertion in society, and strengthen Brazilian theologians to walk this long way that is making public theology in Brazil.

Theologians must get involved in the catechetical and Sunday teaching, aiming to make the membership aware of the problems around them and to assist them in the theological thinking about those problems. On top of that,



becoming present in neighborhoods and in district associations is an important task and it can be another step towards bringing theology to the public society and to the public questions. In that sense, theologians have a huge task in the establishment of public theology in Brazil.

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