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Religion in Portugal

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Portugal, the westernmost country of Europe, was imagined by the propaganda of the fascist régime (1928-1974) as a profoundly Catholic nation. However, more recently, its syncretism has been rediscovered by the scholars of the democratic period. Furthermore, the extensive 1998 ISSP survey on religious beliefs and attitudes seems to corroborate that canonical and non-canonical beliefs and practices coexist effortlessly in Portuguese society.

Prior to the foundation of the state in 1139 C.E., the territory that corresponds to present-day mainland Portugal had already been subject to a cross-pollination of religious influences by the ways of conquest, trade and migration. Before the first Iron Age, which begins as the Phoenician colonization of the Iberian Peninsula advances, all things are shrouded in the absence of thorough archaeological research. The Phoenicians brought not only the technology of iron and the first form of writing known in the Peninsula but also new rites, gods, and ways of worship. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes their survival in Christian garb. An infernal god named Endovellicus, the most documented (70 inscriptions) indigenous deity, provides an additional example of this survival of ancient religious strata; his cult not only thrived under the Roman Empire but took a later Christian spin and became a cult of Saint Michael.

The story of Priscillianism, a fourth-century Christian heresy that emerged in the northwest of the Peninsula, also substantiates an image that almost anything could happen religiously. In the second half of the fourth century, an Egyptian named Marcus arrived in the Peninsula preaching Gnostic and Manicheistic ideas. Several well-off laymen and women pay him attention. Priscillian (*circa* 340-385), a landowner, took the lead of the movement and used his rhetorical gifts in proselytizing. In 380, twelve bishops met in Saragoça to write 8 canons condemning Priscillianism. By 385 Priscillian and four of his followers were executed by decapitation in Treveros under accusations of *maleficium*. Their remains were carried back home and revered. The movement continued, stronger if anything, and only dwindled in the sixth century. Historian José Mattoso has suggested that the main characteristic of the movement was a certain doctrinal formlessness that facilitated its trickling down from the upper strata of society and blending with popular paganism.

Arab Muslims invaded Portugal in the eighth century as part of their spread across the Iberian Peninsula, and continued to dominate the region through the eleventh century. Beginning in that century, a century long effort began that led to the expulsion of the Arabs and the virtual elimination of Islam from the country. A small modern Muslim community

built around expatriates from former Portuguese colonies has formed the Comunidade Islâmica de Lisbon has developed in the twentieth century.

The Knights Templar helped the first king of Portugal, Afonso Henriques (1109?-1185), to conquer the southwestern part of the Peninsula from the Moors, who had controlled it since 711. After the extinction of the Order in 1311, King D. Dinis (1261-1325) renamed the Portuguese branch Order of Christ and left it to go about its business as usual. Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), mastermind of the sixteenth-century discoveries, was himself a leader of this Order and the ships that sailed off from Lisbon flagged the cross of the Order of Christ. These facts are the founding stones of a vast literature of mystic nationalism that speculates about the real aim of the Portuguese discoveries.

In the beginning of the fourteenth century, Joachim de Fiore's theory of the Three Ages began to permeate Portugal. Cistercian and Franciscan monks were the first to succumb to its charms, but the royal family itself would not be unmoved. This theory proclaimed the imminent rise of an Age of the Holy Ghost, following the Ages of the Father and the Son. In this new aeon, humanity would receive a Fifth Gospel by a ceaseless and direct dispensation of the Holy Ghost and the ideal of universal brotherhood would finally become a reality.

The Festivities of the Holy Ghost began during the reign of D. Diniz and queen St. Isabel (1270-1336), circa 1305, and the massive popular adherence that followed quickly spread them throughout the mainland and, later on, the overseas possessions, thus constituting a phenomenon unparalleled in other Christian countries. The main features of these Festivities were the coronation of a child or man of low social standing, symbolizing that The Empire of the Spirit belongs to the "simple and ingenuous ones"; a collective banquet, symbolizing fraternity among men; and the unchaining of a prisoner, symbolizing the liberation of Man.

Counter-reformism and, later on, nineteenth century liberalism contributed to the progressive deterioration of these festivities, which almost disappeared from mainland Portugal. They are still very much alive in the Azores, some parts of Brazil and in some Azorean emigrant communities in the USA. The Empire of the Holy Ghost, as a concept, would reemerge throughout the history of Portuguese mystic thought, namely under the guise of the Fifth Empire proclaimed by sebastianism.

The Inquisition was established in 1536 and remained active until 1821, when it was abolished in result of the liberal revolution of 1820. The estimates of the number of victims, mainly Jews, vary widely but the national archive is reported to hold register of 40,000 inquisitorial processes. Many scholars track Portugal's decadence, a recurrent theme in discussions of national identity, to this source. As for witchcraft, the persecution happened later and was milder (12 casualties) than in the rest of Europe.

In 1578 the disappearance of King Sebastião (1554-1578?) at the catastrophic battle of Alcácer-Quibir, in Morocco, created one of the most serious succession crisis in the history of the country, resulting in the taking over of the Portuguese throne by king Filipe II of Spain. During this national eclipse, a belief spread among the population that king

Sebastião would not have died in North Africa and would return to claim his throne and to reconstitute Portugal's independence and grandeur. This constitutes the so-called first stage of

Sebastianism, where the still reasonable belief in the physical return of the monarch fostered the emergence of diviners, fake King Sebastiãos and prophets, many of them newly converted Jews who saw in this new form of Messianism a desperate solution for their miserable condition. Bandarra (1500-1556?), a village shoemaker, composed a set of prophetic verses that was readily spread around the country and after Alcácer-Quibir was interpreted within a Sebastianistic context. This enthusiasm was severely repressed by the Inquisition which, in the following centuries, would continue to look at Sebastianism as an undesirable popular belief and, in its later configurations, as a dangerous Christian heterodoxy.

As time went by, the lessening of hope in the king's comeback led to the second phase of Sebastianism that constituted no longer the simple belief in the return of a particular savior, but transformed instead into a political philosophy, of which the most influential figure is the Jesuit priest António Vieira (1608-1697). According to Vieira's comparative analysis of biblical texts and Bandarra's prophecies, the return of D. Sebastião, the Concealed One, will coincide with the advent of the Fifth Empire, a spiritual and, simultaneously, temporal kingdom that will establish a new ecumenical order upon Earth. From this point on, Sebastianism and fifth Empirealism became, for many, a foundation of national identity, presenting Portugal with the role of future redeemer of the world, a chosen but yet unfulfilled nation.

As Sebastianistic theories were built, their antitheses inevitably arose. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sour disputes were fought between Sebastianistic and anti-Sebastianistic politicians and men of letters. Popular belief in Sebastianism, however, decreased until extinction. Philosophy and literature, on the other hand, continued to drink from this spring. In the twentieth century, poets such as Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935) and Teixeira de Pascoaes (1877-1952), and philosophical movements such as Renascença Portuguesa, Integralismo Lusitano, and Filosofia Portuguesa, used Sebastianism in their conceptualizing of philosophical and esthetical systems that were meant to reflect an idiosyncratically Portuguese vision and sensibility.

The hegemony of the **Roman Catholic Church** was severely disrupted by the rise of the liberal movement in the 19th century. Thus, 1834 saw the extinction of all male religious orders and the nationalization and auction of convents, monasteries and colleges. Many holy days and religious processions were also abolished. This was not a mere action of 'secularization' but a strong blow against the main pillar of absolutist rule, which relied on the male religious orders for the planning and development of the country's natural resources, the colonization of overseas possessions, and the managing of education and culture. The masonically-inspired First Republic (1910) separated State and Church, no longer recognizing Catholic Christianity as the nation's official religion.

It was in this context that **Theosophy** and **Spiritism** rose and enjoyed some popularity among intellectuals, artists and the military. The Portuguese Theosophical Society was founded in 1921 and the Portuguese Spiritist Federation in 1926. While the Theosophical movement never showed significant adhesion or social impact, the Spiritist movement

gathered important public figures and physical resources. All this ended in 1953, when the then fascist régime's Ministry of Education ordered the Spiritist Federation to cease all activities. Portuguese Spiritists were thus driven underground until the revolution in 1974. The same happened with other religious minorities, such as **Jehovah's Witnesses**. Although the Spiritist movement never regained its original splendor, it has derived into a very popular form of religiousness revolving around the non-corporeal figures of Sousa Martins, a famous Portuguese medical doctor, and Padre Cruz, a pious Catholic priest. What began as an elite movement, which integrated a society of psychical research in Oporto, is currently a phenomenon closer to popular healing traditions.

Theosophy, on the other hand, has played an interesting if subtle role. Fernando Pessoa, whose monumental oeuvre also dwells on occult and Gnostic themes, acknowledged the influence of Helena P. Blavatsky and Annie Besant, leaders of the **Theosophical Society**, and was one of the first translators of their works. Much more recently, in 1988, the Centro Lusitano de Unificação Cultural, one of the most international of Portuguese NRMS, was founded under Theosophical inspiration. Their books, usually 'channeled' by prominent figures of various times and cultures, explicitly utilize theosophical terms and concepts.

Protestantism was initially established in Portugal by organizations serving expatriate communities, such as the British Anglicans (1656) and German Lutherans (1763). Protestant movements seeking to evangelize Catholic Portuguese began in earnest in the nineteenth century with the arrival of the Presbyterians (1838), Christian Brethren (1867), Methodists (1871) and Baptists (1888). They were joined by one important schism of the Roman Church, the **Lusitanian Church of Portugal** (1871). In the twentieth century a spectrum of Protestant/Free Church groups, among the most successful being the **Assemblies of God**, an American Pentecostal body.

While social chaos wrecks Portugal, three shepherd children witnessed the first of a series of Marian apparitions near the town of Fátima, on May, 13th, 1917. These not only helped the Catholic Church to regain its local power but turned into an international religious phenomena moving hundreds of thousands of pilgrims in search of healing or the payment of promises. By 2000, two of the shepherds were beatified.

By 1926 a military coup brought in 48 years of dictatorship. During this period the Catholic Church would regain its hegemony. Thus, by 1929 the religious orders were allowed to return and in 1940 the Holy See celebrated the Concordat with the Portuguese State. This document, which is still in use though many of its articles are now obsolete, gives the Catholic Church exclusive privileges, including the right to celebrate marriages (which could not be terminated by a legal action of divorce); it also returns it control over confiscated assets and the re-introduced religious education in public schools, which had been abolished by the 1st Republic. The 1974 revolution brought in the right of religious association and the freedom of religious choice, thus permitting New Religious Movements based outside of the country to establish themselves in Portugal. 25 years later, a new law of religious freedom was discussed in Parliament. Although an eventual approval of this new law will enhance equality of rights to all religious associations, it still acknowledges a special role for the Catholic Church.

In the 1998 survey, 89,3% of the population claimed to be Catholic, although weekly participation in the activities of the church is less than 30%. After Catholicism, the second highest percentage, 7,8%, refers to people without a religion. The total of individuals belonging to New religions may be lower than 2% of the population, including older movements such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the **Seventh-day Adventist Church**. To date, new religions have not had significant impact at the political or social level, with the exception of two Pentecostal movements, the Brazilian **Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus** and the Portuguese Igreja Maná, which has had a significant expansion to African Portuguese speaking countries.

Finally, one of the most polychromatic aspects of Portuguese religiosity lies in the seasonal religious festivities, most of them celebrated locally with particular variants. Many of these, blending religious-magical motifs, still present remains of ancient pre-Christian traditions while manifesting a creative syncretism with Catholic ceremonies and the cult of saints.

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