

Darwinism and religion in the Brazilian periodic press (1859-1950)

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Abstract

This work discusses the communication of Darwinism in the periodic press of Brazil, focusing on the underlying beliefs and values of the boundary work between science and religion. Historians have argued that the general press was probably more important than books in shaping the public's understanding of new scientific ideas, because they reached a broader readership and held opposite opinions from different contributors and reader's letters. Periodicals are a fruitful medium to undertake a research of how scientists, religious man and the general public interpreted Darwinism and the social dynamics behind the conflicts of opinions.

Articles were selected using a search tool for words in the Brazilian database Hemeroteca Digital of Fundação Biblioteca Nacional. The main terms used were: Darwin, origin of species, Darwinism and Evolutionism; the period studied was 1859 until 1950; and the location was the state of Rio de Janeiro.

In the majority of articles studied what was called as Darwinism was actually a mixture of ideas of Darwin, Lamarck, Haeckel, Spencer and others. Darwinism was cultivated as pure materialism or denounced as a theology disguised as science. In the same way, materialism could be attacked and the theological aspect defended. The arguments for and against evolutionary ideas were often the same and on both sides there

is a common desire and moral duty of conquering the truth and broadcasting it, preventing future generations from believing false ideas. Therefore, the authority over truth is in stake and the discussions involve a power dispute over education.

Introduction

Darwin's ideas about evolution are a great example of how science can be interpreted in a multitude of ways by different publics. As Hull (1988, p. 388) discuss:

Darwinism was many things to many people. It was rank materialism, an atheistic attack on the Christian faith, unadulterated positivism, a death blow to teleology. Simultaneously it was irresponsible speculation, an outrage against positivistic science, a rebirth of teleology, proof of the beneficent hand of God, a Christian plot to subvert the Muslim faith. It was also an intellectual weapon to use against entrenched aristocracies, a justification for laissez-faire economic policies, an excuse for the powerful to subjugate the weak, and a foundation for the Marxian economic theory. (HULL, 1988, p. 388).

In Brazil, similar to what Lightman (2009) describes in Britain and the United States, popular audiences received more "accounts of the evolutionary process emphasizing its progressive nature, its larger purpose and its religious meaning" (LIGHTMAN, 2009, p. 16) than popularizations that were faithful to Darwin's ideas. Despite selling well, the book *The Origin of Species* did not become as popular in Brazil as works of popularizers of the theory, such as T. H. Huxley, Herbert Spencer and Ernst Haeckel, which not only promoted Darwinism, but reinterpreted it according to their convictions. Besides the works of foreign Darwinists, Brazilian intellectuals at conferences, societies, museums, classrooms, columns and articles in the periodic and specialized press contributed to making the name Darwin and his evolutionary ideas best

known in the country, in a positive or negative way. These communicators also imprinted in their activity personal interpretations of Darwinism, which did not always corresponded to the original ideas of the naturalist. In the reinterpretations of the Darwinian thought that were broadcasted in the Brazilian periodic press there was a debate about the frontiers between science and religion, which are the focus of this work.

Methodology

The data source for this study was the portal Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira (Brazilian Digital Newspaper Archive - <http://hemerotecadigital.bn.br/>), organized by Fundação Biblioteca Nacional (National Library Foundation), which provides about five million scanned pages of Brazilian journals since 1808. It offers the options of searching for periodic, period of time and place. It was decided to focus the research in journals of the State of Rio de Janeiro, which has the largest number of digitized publications, approximately 270, while the state of São Paulo, for comparison, has 71. Also, the city of Rio de Janeiro was the federal capital of Brazil for many years (1763-1960), therefore, its journals presented news from all over the country and had influence on national opinion. Initially an exploratory study for decades, beginning in the decade from 1850 to 1859, to include the year of publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859), was performed. All journals from the state of Rio de Janeiro were selected, and the following terms and keywords were used as filter: Darwin, *Origin of Species*, Darwinism and evolutionism.

The words Darwinism and evolutionism were not found in the first two decades of research (1850-1859 and 1860-1869), but after that period only them started to be used because they performed a better selection of the material according to the objective of

this work. The search was performed in this manner until the decade 1900-1910. In the following years the results were becoming more abundant, and due to limited time of research it was not possible to continue with the reading of all occurrences. Therefore, it was chosen to focus the search for the keywords only in the Catholic press, in view of the objective of this work. The following periodicals were selected: The Catholic newspaper *A União* (The Union), the Catholic magazine *Vida: revista universitária* (Life : university journal) and the Catholic newspaper *A Ordem* (The Order). In some cases other words besides de ones already mentioned were used in the search, chosen because of their frequency in the results and relevance to the theme. These were: Haeckel, monism , Miranda Azevedo and Ferri. The research was done until 1950, because until that time the movement called “catholic reaction” had an expressive impact according to the works of Villaça (1975, p. 16), Pinheiro Filho (2007, p. 33) and Cabral (2011, p. 16).

Results and Discussion

In the research of periodicals found in the portal of Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira it was possible to identify the main characters and contexts involved in the debate of evolutionary ideas, and the most frequent questions that led to the discharge or the integration of the darwinian thought by the catholic thought. Through these questions pervade the ways by which scientists and religious people dispute the authority over knowledge and teaching, and how they define the frontiers between their domains with the purpose of ensuring a power of social influence.

One of the most frequent questioning advanced by Catholics about Darwinism was the problems with Darwin’s scientific method. Religious men were reluctant to use

religious arguments against scientific ideas, to avoid repeating the case of Galileo (PAUL, 1988, p. 406), which resulted in a negative image of the relation between science and religion. Therefore, when pointing the lack of proves as a methodological failure of Darwinism, Catholics would always cite names of scientists that supported this argument. Also, they mixed hypothesis about the origin of species and the origin of life, using as argument against the theory of evolution the contestation of theories about abiogenesis. To Catholics, the origin of life or the origin of men were inaccessible in a scientific way, because they considered impossible to have absolute and objective prove about something as intangible as the origins, which could only be investigated with certainty by time travel. Therefore, they shared the vision influenced by baconian tradition that science should be about certainties, and to them darwinism was no more than an unproved hypothesis, which deserved not to be called as science, being closer to religion because it was based more in believes then in facts.

In the Brazilian catholic journal called *O Apostolo* (The Apostle) it was possible to find many articles with these kind of arguments in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, signed by priests or catholic teachers, like Aureliano Pimentel and Feliciano Pinheiro de Bittencourt. The second also gave popular lectures criticizing Darwinism in the neighborhood of Gloria. In the same event of the popular conferences of Gloria, which were organized with the goal of promoting national progress and modernization through education, a doctor named Augusto Cezar de Miranda Azevedo gave lectures defending Darwinism, which became famous in the press and were target of a lot of critics from the journal *O Apostolo*. It was from his lectures in 1875 that the theme Darwinism exploded in popular press. However, according to a military Colonel

named Rodolpho Pau Brasil, before the broadcasting of Darwinism made by Miranda Azevedo, a lot of teachers from the military school of Praia Vermelha (Red Beach) and from the Polytechnic school, the two firsts institutions of higher education in Rio de Janeiro, were already teaching Darwinism in their classes.

Pau Brasil wrote columns to the journals *Diário de Notícias* (Daily News) and *Gazeta da Tarde* (Afternoon Gazette) with the pseudonym Hartmann (reference to the German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann). He was very dedicated to the promotion of evolutionism, which was to him almost like a sacred mission, and he hoped that one day religion would be substituted by science, in special, by evolutionism. Pau Brasil was a member of an society called *Familia Evolucionista* (Evolutionist Family), created in the military school of Praia Vermelha by intellectuals interested in discussing the theory of evolution, influenced mainly by the ideas of Hebert Spencer. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century there was a dispute between two philosophical schools, the evolutionistic and the positivistic. Pau Brasil criticized positivism many times in his columns as the positivist Oscar de Araújo (member and one of the founders of the Positivistic Society of Rio de Janeiro) criticized evolutionism, Darwinism and monism in a series of articles to the journal *Jornal do Brasil* (Journal of Brazil) in 1892. But despite the differences between evolutionists and positivists, they agreed in one thing: that education should be secular. Therefore, to Catholics they represented the same “enemy” and were classified and criticized together.

Against the increase of social influence of positivists, evolutionists and other streams of thought that defended the restriction of the power of the Catholic Church, a movement called “catholic reaction” started to be organized, around the end of the first

two decades of the twentieth century. A lot of intellectuals were converted to Catholicism and begun to claim that this religion should not be reduced to celebrations and traditions. They were especially concerned with education and the relations between Christian faith and science, because they realized the importance of the dialog with science for their project of making religion stronger in politics and in the cultural life of the country. Therefore, they campaigned in defense of facultative confessional teaching in public schools. This cause is won in April 1931, when Getúlio Vargas ends the secularity of public education after 40 years, instituting facultative religious education. Moreover, the first Catholic university of Brazil is created, beginning with the Association of Catholic College (AUC), in 1929, after the Catholic Institute of Higher Studies (ICES) in 1932 and finally in 1941 the Catholic University (CABRAL 2011, p. 71). Among the first courses created in the university are Education and Journalism, as the training of teachers and Catholic journalists was considered important to the goals of evangelization of the catholic intellectuals who founded the university.

The movement of catholic reaction was consolidated with the creation of a center called *Centro Dom Vital* in 1922, which printed monthly a magazine called *A Ordem* (The Order). From 1921 to 1928, under the direction of Jackson Figueiredo, this magazine had as epigraph a line of the French catholic journalist Louis Veillot about the question if men should be considered a God creature or an improved worm. Opening the magazine with this line, catholic intellectual showed their concern with scientific theories connected with Darwinism. Before the creation of *A Ordem*, one of the first converts of the movement of catholic reaction, Antônio Felício dos Santos, had founded a catholic journal called *A União* (The Union), in 1897. The editor of this journal, the catholic

journalist Oliveira e Silva, was a great critic of evolutionism, writing about it mainly in his column in the journal *Gazeta de Notícias* (News Gazette). He was also involved in a series of conferences organized by Catholics against the ideas of the Italian criminologist Enrico Ferri, who came to Brazil in 1908 and lectured in favor of Darwinism and against religion. The priest João Gualberto Amaral and the intellectual Carlos de Laet were also a part of this debate, criticizing Darwinism. The episode caused a representative increase of discussions involving the name Darwin in the press, and its repercussion was so great that a cartoon was published in the journal *Fon Fon* (Figure 1).

Despite the criticism, Catholics were not completely opposed to Darwinism. In the gaps not yet filled with scientific explanations they saw a way to conciliate evolution with God. Matter could evolve by itself to become all the diversity of species, but how a matter capable of that kind of evolution could have appeared? A God who creates the world to be independent of His work seems to be much cleverer than a God that interferes all the time to destroy and create new beings, some Catholics argued. As long as the materialistic approach of evolution was kept away, the theory could brilliantly be conciliated with Christian faith. Also, the idea of progress, frequently taken as a synonym of evolution, was very appealing. Things were changing in a good direction, in the direction of perfection, and that could only be explained by the action of a superior being leading things in the “right” way. Even the ape ancestry of men, which initially caused much trouble with the Catholic Church, could be accepted, as long as the special creation of the soul was preserved. According to intellectual Catholics, if humans and apes are so similar in the physical aspect, only an act of God would explain the major cognitive difference between them. Oliveira e Silva, Joaquim Nabuco and the priest

Camille Torrend S. J. are examples of Catholics who did this kind of conciliation. But also scientists conciliated their beliefs in God with evolution, like Ladislau Netto and João Batista de Lacerda, both from the National Museum, and the intellectual João Zeferino Rangel de S. Paio.

Conclusion

Darwinism was not necessarily a topic of a conflict between scientists and religious people, but among those who considered that evolutionary ideas were compatible with religion and those who perceived them as exclusive opposites.

In most discussions of Darwinism and Catholicism presented in this work it could be observed that when Catholics criticize scientists or a scientific theory, they maintain a favorable opinion about science as an institution. The image of science as true and useful knowledge to human progress seems to have been popularized and incorporated successfully despite all the failures of scientists. Catholics are not naive enough to consider true all knowledge classified as scientific, however, when they criticize theories like Darwinism, they do it by the assertion that these are not science, because if they were there would not be a problem to conciliate them with religion.

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