# Dialogue with the devil

by Dean Peerman in the December 6, 2000 issue

*Secret Dialogues: Church-State Relations, Torture, and Social Justice in Authoritarian Brazil*, by Kenneth P. Serbin

Traditionally, church-state relations have been quite cozy in predominantly Catholic Brazil--relations operating under what Kenneth Serbin calls an unwritten "moral concordat." But in 1964 the Brazilian military, obsessed with fear of communism and faced with an economy in chaos, overthrew the leftist government of João Goulart and initiated dictatorial rule that was to last for 21 years. The military came to power at a time when the Catholic Church--under the leadership of men like Archbishop Hélder Câmara and Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns--was becoming more and more innovative and progressive, focusing on the plight of the poor and seeking to be "the voice of the voiceless." Church-state conflict became inevitable. Priests, nuns and lay leaders accused of subversive activities were arrested; some were tortured; a few were killed.

Yet though cross and sword were at odds during the junta years, they did not--contrary to common assumption--entirely keep their distance. Drawing on more than 60 interviews and using archival material not previously available, Serbin, a Brazil specialist who teaches Latin American history at the University of San Diego, relates the heretofore untold story of the Bipartite Commission, a group of bishops and generals who met at regular intervals and in secret to try to ameliorate church-state clashes. The Bipartite Commission convened during the dictatorship's most repressive period--from 1970 to 1974, when the regime of Emílio Garrastazu Médici hunted down all opposition, nonviolent activists as well as urban guerrillas. The commission tended to be dominated by moderates from both sides, but it also, as Serbin points out, illustrated the interpretive limits of such designations as "progressive" and "conservative." For example, Cardinal Eugênio de Araújo Sales, a key member of the Bipartite, is generally remembered as a conservative with close ties to the military. Yet behind the scenes he quietly carried out tasks that one might expect a progressive to perform, such as aiding political prisoners and protesting violations of human rights.

Why would a hard-liner like President Médici favor the creation of something like the Bipartite? Ruthless he may have been, but as Serbin notes, he was never opposed to dialogue--and of course, he hoped to gain religious legitimation for his rule from the meetings with the bishops, as well as to persuade them to soften criticism and rein in grass-roots militants. A question that lay at the root of many Bipartite exchanges was, When does the quest for social justice become subversion? Not surprisingly, the participants never reached a consensus on the matter, since the military officers tended to regard as subversive any viewpoint other than their own.

According to Serbin, the military, being the more powerful entity, probably gained more from the Bipartite than did the church. Still, it was far from being a futile enterprise for the bishops. It gave the church "time to regroup from the regime's attacks"; it helped preserve "Catholicism's privileges as Brazil's semi-official religion"; it "furnished an excellent example of decompression between the regime and a main opposition group." The commission did secure the release of some political prisoners, and it "did save at least some people from torture and perhaps even death." Moreover, the bishops' vigorous defense of human rights may have helped pave the way for the liberalization that was to come later.

To cite one example of what made the Bipartite worthwhile: It was the evidence provided to the commission by Bishop Waldyr Calheiros de Novaes that resulted in a kind of justice in a case involving soldiers at the barracks in Barra Mansa. The military could be tough on its own personnel as well as on civilians, but this case led the generals to realize that torture at the hands of lower-ranking officers was getting out of control. In January 1972, 15 Barra Mansa soldiers suspected of using and trafficking in marijuana were detained and tortured. Four of the soldiers died as a result of their ordeal, two of them by having their heads crushed in a vise. Because Dom Waldyr spoke out in convincing detail about the atrocity, no cover-up was possible, and the perpetrators were convicted and imprisoned. Unfortunately, this is the only case in two decades of dictatorship in which torturers were held accountable.

One point in Serbin's book needs amplification. He states in passing that "the Presbyterian Church throughout Brazil heavily supported the [military] regime." That was generally true (and true of other Protestant groups as well), but there were significant exceptions. Not all Presbyterian pastors backed the junta; in fact, some of the more liberal ones were denounced to security forces by fellow Presbyterians. Later in the book, Serbin mentions the brothers Paulo and Jaime Wright but fails to

note that they were Presbyterians (Brazilian-born sons of American missionaries). Paulo Wright, a state representative in Santa Catarina and a longtime leader in Brazil's branch of the World Student Christian Federation, was "disappeared" and executed in the '70s, presumably because of his involvement with Ação Popular, a student-inspired leftist political movement. Serbin identifies Jaime Wright as a "Protestant minister . . ., a close collaborator of Dom Paulo [Cardinal Arns] in the human rights struggle and a suspected subversive." During the dictatorship, this "suspected subversive" served as a Century correspondent, writing under the pseudonym Roberto Barbosa.

It should be noted that even at the height of the repression, Brazil's Catholic bishops did not hesitate to take action quite apart from the deliberations of the Bipartite. Serbin has little to say about the situation of the country's Indians--or the fact that the military regime's much-touted "economic miracle" was achieved in part at the expense of the Indians, as their lands were increasingly encroached upon by foreign investors intent upon exploration and exploitation. But toward the end of the Médici period the bishops issued--obviously without any authorization from the government--a manifesto titled "O Indio: Aquele Que Deve Morrer" (The Indian: Why He Is Doomed). Deeply troubled by the Indians' circumstances, the bishops deplored the de facto genocide being practiced against these indigenous people, attributing their gradual extinction to the regime's development policies.

Though still plagued by a plethora of political problems and serious social inequities, Brazil today is once again a democracy. Ironically, however, the Brazilian Catholic Church by and large has returned to traditional ways, chiefly because the Vatican has seen fit to replace liberationist bishops with conservatives, some of whom are staunchly opposed to all forms of liberation theology and praxis.

Serbin's painstakingly documented work should be of interest not only to scholars and Brazilophiles but to anyone concerned with human rights and the relationship between religion and politics.