The influence of the Catholic model of church-state relations on the secularisation in Mozambique and Angola

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1. Introduction

This paper is a first attempt to characterise and explain the type of secularism emerging in Catholic-majority countries in the former Portuguese colonies in Africa in the 1990s. These countries are classified as “secular but open to religion” (Stepan, 2000), a model of relations between religion and state which is atypical in Africa for presenting high levels of cooperation between the churches and the states (Bernardo and Sanches, 2016, 120).

We argue that the development of such a form of secularism – combining respect for religious freedom, separation between church and state and forms of cooperation – owes much to the influence of the Catholic church and its post-Vatican Council II conception of secularism. In the two cases we present here, Angola and Mozambique, we explore the ways in which cooperation between the Catholic church and the regimes are linked to a robust intervention of the church in the peace and democratization processes, and point to ways in which this led to a predisposition for maintaining high levels of cooperation, especially in Mozambique. Here, the strong links forged between the political forces and the Catholic church during the mediation of the peace in the early 1990s contributed to a long-term openness of the state towards religions, and, in particular, to an institutionalised cooperation with the Catholic Church, formalised in the 2012 Concordat.

Although the changes in the Catholic doctrine on church-state relations in the Vatican Council II (1962-65) are strongly linked to the democratization late-20th century, there is no systematic assessment of the church’s influence on the secularisation effects of democratizing countries in non-Western contexts. However, the Conciliar doctrine was the basis for the Church’s modus operandi in processes of pacification, democratization and secularisation not only in Europe but in Africa and South America. The Church’s intervention in such processes also influenced the model of church-state relations adopted.

The secularising impact of Catholic doctrine - after the Vatican Council II –on non-western societies is here considered to be the result of the church’s intervention on processes of transition to peace and democracy and have an impact on the re-regulation of church-state relations. The Vatican Council II (1962–1965) assimilated canon law to international law, with the human rights principle of religious freedom as the basis of the church’s aggiornamento with liberal democracy (Perreau-Saussine 2012). This created a consensus among the three levels: national, international (profane), and the Catholic law on human freedom. The church’s Conciliar doctrine is a hybrid: while upholding religious freedom and church-state separation, it also argues in favour of the state’s recognition of religious institutions as potential partners, and grants them favourable arrangements compared to other social organizations, eventually granting churches the status of public institutions.
The arrangements proposed by the Catholic doctrine are akin to Alfred Stepan’s arguments: that to be compatible with democracy, regimes can accommodate the demands of religions but be respectful of the “twin tolerations”. The church’s informal diffusion of Vatican Council norms on former Portuguese African colonies resulted in a compromise with Marxist-inspired secularists based on three principles: 1) that the state upholds religious freedom 2) that there is separation between church and state and 3) that the state recognises religions and allows for a degree of cooperation with the churches. Such model is not only compatible with the standards of democratic liberalism, but it appears to be a useful tool for regulate church-state relations in highly religious societies, in particular those also characterised by strong religious pluralism.

The two cases here presented exemplify two paths of involvement of the Catholic Church in the pacification, democratisation and secularisation processes and analysis whether the openness of the state to religion in the 1980s and the Church’s alliances with other religions has affected its capacity to play a political role in these processes. The paper also considers the openness of the international setting as a factor allowing the church to get involved in the peace negotiations.

In Mozambique, an early onset of cooperation between the regime and the church resulted in an increasingly central and political role for the church, which culminated in the church mediating the General Peace agreement (1992). From the early 1980s the state relaxed its opposition to Catholicism, eliminated the restrictions and restored Church properties, allowing the church to reestablish its pastoral and social standing. The church established collaboration with the Protestant churches. The Bishops carved out an increasingly relevant political role as mediators between the two parts, and their declarations and peace initiatives. The church established a lasting cooperation with the state, formalised in the signing of a Concordat in 2012.

Angola’s state repression kept the church’s role diminished in both pastoral and social terms for a longer period. Also, the Protestant churches were involved with the different sides in the conflict and were unwilling to ally with the Catholic Church in attempts to resolve the war. With limited capacity and political weight, the political role of the Bishops in the dual transition was diminished. Nevertheless, the state progressively re-established religious freedoms, while maintaining some informal control over religion and keeping a more limited cooperation.

2. The Religious Landscapes

Angola and Mozambique are former Portuguese colonies whose independence was achieved in 1975 after a period of armed struggle (1961-74) against the authoritarian and colonial regime of Oliveira Salazar. The Catholic Church enjoyed special relations with the Estado Novo which were strengthened by the Concordata and the Missionary Accords, signed in May 1940. The 1940s accords
established the rules of the modern implantation of the Catholic church in the two countries, granting to the Portuguese Catholic hierarchy authority over the Catholic missions in Angola and Mozambique. It established three dioceses in each country, all led by Portuguese Bishops, with authority to oversee the actions of the Catholic missions with religious, educational and healthcare competences. It was explicitly assumed that the Catholic Church was to assist in the development of the state through educational and health care activities. Protected by the Salazar's regime, the Catholic achieved a significant territorial expansion (esp. 1940-1975), whereas the Protestant missions were geographically and ethnically concentrated.

Both countries are predominantly Christian and highly religious (Gallup 2009). The Catholic Church is the strongest religious force: not only is it the one with the most followers, but also the one with the widest presence in the territories, as well as having a structuring role for nation-building. In Angola, about 80% of the population is Christian, of which half are Catholics and the rest belong to different protestant denominations. The three main Protestant churches, the Methodist, the Baptist and the Congregational missions arrived in the 19th century and are strongly implanted among the different Angolan ethnic groups. The Baptists missionized the Makongo in the North (and came to be linked with the FNLA). The Methodists concentrated their work among the Ambundu in the Central Angola (and were linked to the MPLA) and the missions of the Presbiterians and the Congregationalists are found mainly in the South, among the Ovimbundu, and are known to be linked with the UNITA.

Mozambique’s religious landscape is more heterogeneous, with Christians amounting to half of the population, of which the Catholics are the most numerous (around 30%) and the remaining are Pentecostals and Evangelicals (around 12%) and Zionist Catholics (around 16%). Islam is the second religion (18%).

Mozambique presents, comparatively to its neighbors in the region, low scores in Fox’s indexes on government regulation of religion, governmental favoritism of religion and social regulation of religion. In Angola the weaker position of the church vis-à-vis the secular forces in government is consistent with higher levels of informal control over religion and with the regime’s refusal to recognize religion (Bernardo and Sanches 2015, 120).

3. Peace processes and Church involvement

In both countries, after the 1975 independence, the former liberation movements, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) and the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique
(FRELIMO) founded Marxist Leninist regimes while struggling with an intra-state war fueled by the regional context of Southern Africa and, to different degrees, by the Cold War.

The road to the peace agreements began in the late 1980s, when military stalemate, the end of the Cold War and the Apartheid regime, predisposed the warring parts for negotiations. In the early 1990's the peace accords signed in Angola and Mozambique designed a dual transition to peace and to democracy, sealed by the first multiparty elections.

In Mozambique the church assumed a key role as a mediator during the peace process and negotiations that ended the civil war. In 1983, the bishops created the Commission on Justice and Peace, a sort of justice and truth commission avant-la-lettre. The commission gathered the only data independently collected (registers were created in all the parishes) on all the victims of the war. The data on the violations of human rights was diffused through pastoral letters - more than 20 of which were dedicated to the war - to pressure the sides to stop atrocities against the civil population.

The analysis of the Mozambican Bishops pastoral letters shows how the hierarchy succeeded in carving out a political role in the peace process. The bishops spoke of the conflict as a civil war, rather than following the FRELIMO government's accusation of that the conflict was a foreign-induced (by Rodhesia and the Apartheid South African regime). The bishops urged the FRELIMO government to engage with Renamo on peace negotiations from the early 1980s (a position that was accepted by the Frelimo only in 1990). For example, after the signing of the 1984 Nkomati peace accord between FRELIMO and South Africa on peace in Mozambique, the bishops criticised the efforts for ignoring Renamo as an interlocutor (see “Um brinde incompleto à paz”, 1984). As a military thaw between FRELIMO and Renamo emerged in 1988, the bishops urged FRELIMO to recognise Renamo as a negotiation partner (see "A paz que o povo quer", 1988). The letter was issued after Bishop Jaime Gonçalves met Afonso Dhlakham, the Renamo leader, in June 1988, at its headquarters in Gorongosa.

From 1988 to 1990 the church multiplied the initiatives for peace and Mozambican Catholic bishops were important elements of the international negotiations. From 1988 both FRELIMO and Renamo leaders established contacts with the Vatican, at the level of Secretary of State Sodano and Msg Touran. As the initiatives of the regional powers (Kenya) to bring the parts to the table failed, Rome and the Catholic organization St Egidio emerged as the most convenient setting for peace talks. The first round of talks was held in July 1990 and resulted in the signing of the General Peace Agreement in 1992. During the peace talks, the church was a proponent of measures leading to the democratization of the country.

In Angola the church did not play as significant a role in the peace and attempted democratization of the country. Signed in May 1991, the Bicesse Accords sought to end Angola's civil war. However, when the MPLA won the September 1992 elections, the former belligerent and defeated party and its leader (UNITA and Jonas Savimbi ) reacted violently and the civil conflict resumed. The war ended in 2002 through a military victory of the MPLA government. Although the relations with
the churches improved in the 2000s, the cooperation is less developed than in Mozambique and the state maintained informal controls over the churches activities.

During the 1980s the Church capacity to carve a political role was severely limited by the MPLA’s continued repression. The Bishops issued a significant number of pastoral letters that were strongly critical of the government repression of religion (Heywood 2006, 198) and argued for peace and democracy, but none became politically significant (Cruz e Silva 2017, 15; Neves 2012, 228).

Also, the Bishops offered to mediate between the two sides in 1986, but received no response. The church was absent from the negotiations that led to the Gbadolite Accords in 1989, and criticised the agreement for entrenching the positions of the two sides rather than pushing for the only sure way to peace, according to them being democratic reforms. The MPLA claimed that the bishops’ pro-democratic stance favoured unfairly the UNITA and, therefore, continued to limit the influence of the Catholic Church and other religious organizations. The church never gained the status of a neutral entity representing civil society, continuing to be seen as a supporter of UNITA.

The Church continued to speak out, but could not bring both sides to agree to, nor to honour a peace deal. As the conflict resumed after the 1992 elections, the MPLA’s rejection of the Catholic initiatives continued. When the bishops’ conference joined forces with protestant churches in Angola to form COIEPA, the MPLA rejected their efforts for further negotiation. In 2000 the bishops sponsored the Movement for Peace and the COIEPA offered mediation, which was accepted by UNITA’s Savimbi, but was considered by the state as a limitation to its “peace through war” strategy, a strategy that gained increased international support after the turn of the millennium. In 2001, the bishops from the entire South African region issued a joint offer for mediation directly between dos Santos and Savimbi, but this initiative was not accepted.

4. Factors working for Catholic interventions in the peace processes

Here we analyse three factors associated with the Catholic hierarchy’s intervention in the double processes of peace and democracy in Mozambique and Angola. This section will describe 1) the relations of the Catholic Church in Angola and Mozambique regarding the state; 2) Catholic alliances with other Christian churches 3) the openness of the international powers in the context of peace negotiations in the two countries. In comparison, we see that the Mozambican Catholic Church was independent from, but had a cooperative relation with, the FRELIMO and the Mozambican state since the early 1980s. Angola’s Catholic Church, however, was weakened by the state’s antagonism to its activities up until 1990. Second, the Mozambique Catholic bishops started alliances with the protestant churches already in the mid-1980s, whereas in Angola cooperation only started after 2000. Third, Cold War great powers were more invested in the peace process in Angola than in that of Mozambique. The lack of interest of the great powers, and the failure of regional ones, gave the Mozambican Catholic bishops – and the Vatican – more of a leeway and they became important stakeholders in the peace
process and the democratic transition. In Angola, the weight of the Catholic bishops in the peace process was minor, also due to the direct intervention of the USA and the Soviet Union in the peace process.

The relation of the Catholic Church with the one-party state and other churches during the authoritarian period and the opening up of the regime/transition (1975-1992)

From independence in 1975, the relation between the Catholic Church and the state was very tense in both countries. However, in Mozambique, the FRELIMO initiated a more cooperative relation from the early 1980s, whereas in Angola the MPLA antagonized the church up until the 1990s. After independence from the Portuguese colonial rule in 1975, the former liberations movements took power, and instituted a Marxist-Leninist regime aiming at forging a New Nation and a modernized state. At their 3rd Congress in 1977, the MPLA and the FRELIMO’s ideological declarations called for freedom from the oppressive and obscurantist past of the colonial regime. Due to the close relationship between the Catholic Church and the former Portuguese colonial regime, the regimes antagonized the church as an anti-patriotic and anti-revolutionary institution (Heywood 2006; Morier-Genoud & Anouilh 2012). The church suffered a loss of status, privileges and properties, but it also seized the opportunity to rebuild itself under the constitutional protection of religious freedom enshrined in the 1975 constitutions (Newitt 2002).

In the late 1970s, as a result of the anti-clerical program launched in both countries, the churches saw their existence endangered: they lost property to the state and freedom of cult was heavily limited. The confiscation of the churches’ properties meant that the basis of the churches social activities (in particular as health providers and in education) was transferred to the state (Cruz e Silva 2017, 14). In Angola, from 1977 to 1980, the MPLA excluded religious believers from the party (Cruz e Silva 2017, 16). Moreover, the MPLA’s government carried out anti-Catholic campaigns, and any Catholic who appeared sympathetic to opposition movement UNITA faced harassment (Heywood 2006, 197).1 The "church members were obliged to leave the MPLA or were forced to publicly reject their religious belief." (Comerford 2007, 496). MPLA repression of the church continued into the 1990s. The state’s intolerance at the Church’s democratic efforts include limiting visas for Catholic missionaries in 1989 and shutting down the Catholic radio station, Radio Ecclesia, in 1999 for airing an interview with Jonas Savimbi, and again in 2001 for subversion.

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1 The Angolan party-state decided in 1978 that missionary priests must register as foreign residents and could only operate as foreign residents (Heywood 2006, 198).
In Mozambique, the FRELIMO government developed a legal framework (early 1978) to limit religious activities, leading to the expropriation of the Catholic Church property and limiting freedom of cult. The government arrested the bank accounts of the dioceses, missions and religious institutions (Cabrita 2000, 120; Vines 1996, 103-104). Moreover, it banned the teaching of religion in all public schools. Catholic private education and health facilities were also targeted, affecting all churches for their mission schools, seminaries and hospitals, as well as youth religious associations (Cabrita 2000, 121).

The anti-religious offensive led to flight, but also to resistance. In 1975, more than 600 missionaries left Mozambique and in the following years the exodus continued (Cabrita 2000, 121). But the late 1970s and early 1980s was also a period in which the church, freed from the Portuguese colonial presence, could rebuild itself as an independent institution, and one which was anchored in the Mozambican and Angolan people. Moreover, in Mozambique, the church held contacts with the RENAMO, also as a strategy to pressure the government to stop repression against itself (Vines 1996, 105).

In the early 1980s the trajectories of church-state relations in Angola and Mozambique diverged. While in Angola the MPLA regime antagonized the church until the 1990s, in Mozambique, from 1979 on, the government admitted the negative effects of the anti-religious campaign, and took steps to improve relations, by reopening churches and allowing the return of expelled missionaries. The church resumed cooperation with the state on health and education, thus recovering its social significance (Cruz e Silva 2017, 21).

The church also took steps to improve its relation with the regime and, from 1983, the Vatican established contacts with the Mozambican regime (Vines 1996, 105). In 1988, the Pope John Paul II visited the country, and the state proceeded to return the church’s expropriated property. By 1989, the tensions between the government and the church had largely disappeared and a climate of cooperation prevailed.

The Catholic church formed a united front for peace with Protestant churches in the mid-1980s, and their efforts were crucial to bring forward the peace process (Cruz e Silva 2017, 11). The Mozambican Christian Council (CCM) became actively involved in the peace process in 1984, and established a Peace and Reconciliation Commission (Vines 1996, 120). In 1987 the Protestant churches contacted RENAMO, with the permission of President Samora Machel (Chan & Venâncio 1998, 19). With improved relations between the Catholic Church and the Mozambican government in early 1988, the CCM invited the Catholic Archbishop of Mozambique, Alexandre dos Santos, to join the delegations of churches meeting in Nairobi with RENAMO.

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2 Catholic officials had to bring with them a travel guide to be able to travel around the country, and the publication and distribution of religious works were controlled by the State (Cabrita 2000, 120 and 135). In some cases, members of the clergy were arrested (house arrest) (Morier-Genoud & Anouilh 2012).
In Angola, no common ground between Protestant and Catholics was achieved until 2000, when an Inter-Ecclesial Committee for Peace (COIEPA) was founded. It joined the two protestant branches – organized in the CICA (Council of Christian Churches of Angola) and the AE (Angolan Evangelical Alliance) - and the Catholic Bishops (organized in the CEAST). The alliance was established just before the Bicesse Accords (1991), and the weight of the religious organizations in Angola in the peace negotiations was minimal. The failure of the Christian Churches to promote a united approach compounded the failure to secure peace in Angola (Messiant 2000, 1).

The openness of international conditions as mediators in the peace process and democratization

The context of the war in Mozambique provided space for religious actors, in particular the Catholic Bishops and the Vatican to intervene and shape the processes. In contrast, in Angola, the heavy involvement of the great powers in the context of the Cold War gave religious actors less opportunity to intervene in the double transition.

The dynamics of the conflict and its resolution in Mozambique were, contrary to Angola’s, predominantly dominated by the regional context rather than the international geopolitics of the Cold War (Minter 1994, 216). From the outset, Mozambique was much less important to the US diplomacy than Angola (Costa Pinto 2001, 75). Mozambique’s independence in 1975 was a threat to the white minorities regimes in Rhodesia and South Africa, especially due to the support of FRELIMO to the black nationalist movements in the two countries. Triggered by FRELIMO’s support to the United Nations resolutions on economic sanctions against the Rhodesian regime, the Rhodesian secret services sponsored the formation of the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO), which waged war against the FRELIMO regime. The FRELIMO’s government most pressing issue at external level since 1975 was the opposition of Rhodesia’s regime (Hall and Young 1997, 115). After the fall of this regime in 1980, the Apartheid regime in South Africa took over support to RENAMO. On the global international level, the FRELIMO government receive military and financial support of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc (Alden and Simpson 1993, 110-113; Newitt 1995, 558). However, Mozambique was much less important to the US, and Congress eliminated bilateral aid already in 1977 (Minter 1994, 191).

Angola's post-independence war had roots in the liberation struggle. The three main organizations of the Angolan anti-colonial movements - the FNLA, the MPLA and the UNITA – represented different ethnic groups and fought among themselves for control of the territory and for recognition of their legitimate and exclusive representation of the people (Messiant 2008, 35). The decolonization of Angola was the most complex and violent of all the Portuguese regimes (Costa Pinto 2001, 75-76). The civil war started initially between these three actors, and ended opposing the MPLA's government and the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA).
The armed conflict in Angola was strongly linked to the dynamics of the Cold War, with Cubans and Soviets confronting Western interests in Africa (Minter 1994, 9). The United States conveyed economic and military aid to the UNITA (Rothchild and Hartzell 1995, 177). Both Cuba and South Africa deployed combat troops on a regular basis in the Angolan territory, Cuba in support of the MPLA and South Africa through military operations in the south and southeast of Angola in support to UNITA (Birmingham 2002). The action of these four external actors conditioned the character and duration of the Angolan conflict (Minter 1994, 9). The regional dimension was equally prominent, and linked to fighting against the SWAPO forces and against South Africa’s ANC. Mobutu’s Zaire intervention sought to block MPLA’s support of the Katangueses who fought against his regime.

When the parts got ready to start peace negotiations in the late 1980s, the US and USSR were highly engaged in finding a deal to end Angola’s war, while largely neglecting the Mozambican peace negotiations. Initially, regional powers (Kenya) were engaged in efforts to bring the parts to the negotiation table in Mozambique, but when these efforts failed, the Vatican and Italy emerged mediators. Mozambican bishops efforts for peace and democracy were continued on the international level when negotiations started in the St. Egidio community in July 1990.

5. Analysis

The analysis of the Catholic Churches trajectories show how the civil war, in particular in Mozambique, allowed the church to recover its role as a partner of the state, even in the face of Marxist-Leninist regimes willing to curb its influence. Moreover, the comparative analysis also points out that when they could, national hierarchies used their increasing influence to spread a “Catholic” type of church-state relations characterized, after the Vatican Council II doctrinal changes, by church-state separation and high levels of cooperation, especially in the areas of health and education. In highly religious societies as those of sub-Saharan Africa, where religion is such an important marker of social identities, but also where religious allegiances are often fluid, the Catholic model appears to be an appropriate modification of liberal secularism, by allowing the state to combine respect of religious freedom and church-state separation with the acknowledgement of the social and political role of religion.

References


