

Cecília Meireles and religious education in the 1930s: confrontation in favor of the New School

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Abstract

This article analyzes the performance of Cecília Meireles against the decree on religious education in public schools in 1931. This subject is particularly important because some studies which analyzed the path of Cecília Meireles and her connection with education have not deeply examined the elements of her criticism regarding religious education. This article aims to bring new aspects of Cecília Meireles' path and her conflict with the policies of the provisional government of Getúlio Vargas. Between 1930 and 1933, Meireles criticized the events within this period in *Página de Educação* (Education Page) of *Diário de Notícias*, a daily newspaper. Initially, we note that this educator adhered to the New School ideas and founded on them her defense of the public school. The methodology consisted of reviewing, from a dialectical perspective, primary sources from her connections with the historical events in that period, seeking to understand this educator's writing in her time. We found the isolation and disappointment of Cecília Meireles about the course of Getúlio Vargas' government. However, Meireles kept her optimism, believing in a school which, referenced in the New School ideas, met the interests of the Brazilian population, and, therefore, she criticized conservatism and the presence of religion in the Brazilian educational field.

Keywords

Cecilia Meireles – Religious education – New school.

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Cecília Meireles e o ensino religioso nos anos 1930: embates em defesa da escola nova

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Resumo

O artigo analisa a atuação de Cecília Meireles no combate ao decreto do ensino religioso nas escolas públicas de 1931. Esse tema adquire importância ao percebermos que alguns estudos que analisaram a trajetória de Cecília Meireles e sua relação com a educação não aprofundaram os aspectos das críticas à educação religiosa por parte dessa educadora. O objetivo do artigo é trazer novos elementos do percurso de Cecília Meireles e seu conflito com as políticas do governo provisório de Getúlio Vargas. Entre os anos 1930 e 1933, Meireles escreveu suas críticas aos acontecimentos do período na Página de Educação do jornal Diário de Notícias. Inicialmente, notamos que essa educadora assumiu de forma radical o pensamento escolanovista e com ele fundamentou suas posições em defesa da escola pública. A metodologia utilizada foi a análise das fontes primárias, a partir de suas relações com os acontecimentos históricos do período, de uma perspectiva dialética, procurando entender a produção escrita da educadora em e com o seu tempo. Constatamos no estudo o afastamento e a desilusão de Cecília Meireles quanto aos rumos do governo Getúlio Vargas. Entretanto, Meireles manteve seu otimismo na crença em uma escola que atendesse aos interesses da população brasileira, referenciada no pensamento da Escola Nova e, com isso, teceu suas críticas ao conservadorismo e à presença da religião no campo educacional brasileiro.

Palavras-chave

Cecília Meireles – Ensino religioso – Escola Nova.

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The early 1930s were marked by many conflicts, arising from the economic, political, social and cultural changes that occurred in Brazil. Several authors have devoted themselves to study this important historical moment, which was rich in the context of the strengthening of the state and social policies (FAUSTO, 1989; MARTINS, 1983; AGGIO; BARBOSA; COELHO, 2002; CONNIFF, 2006, among others). In the educational field, it was no different, since educational thinking grounded in the process of affirmation and constitution of liberalism as an ideology was under construction in Brazil (XAVIER, 1990). With this background, we believe that Cecilia Meireles' path is revealing for understanding the educational debates of the time, especially on the delicate issue of religious education.

Here I analyze Cecilia Meireles' action to combat the decree of religious education in public schools (Decree 19941 of April 30, 1931) signed by the Minister of Education and Public Health, Francisco Campos. Our study focuses on Página da Educação (Education Page) of *Diário de Notícias* newspaper, from 1930 to 1933.¹ In this space, Meireles expressed with mastery and elegance her opposition to the relationship of religion and public schooling.

Thus, within the complexity of 1930s, I tried to understand the educational debates of the period, which indicated conflicting themes for the following decades and still occupy the agenda of the early years of the twenty-first century (MAGALDI; GONDRA, 2003; XAVIER, 2004), in which religious education is a significant issue.

Cecilia Meireles in the 1930s: the new education poet

Cecilia Benevides Carvalho de Meireles,² daughter of Carlos Alberto de Carvalho Meireles, a civil servant of Banco do

Brasil, and of Matilde Benevides Meireles, a municipal teacher, was born on November 7, 1901, in Rio Comprido neighborhood, in Rio de Janeiro city. Cecilia Meireles was the only survivor of the four children of the couple. Her father passed away three months before her birth and her mother died before she turned three. Her grandmother, Jacinta Garcia Benevides, assumed the responsibility of raising her granddaughter (LÔBO, 2010, p. 11).

In 1917, Meireles graduated from Escola Normal do Largo do Estácio and started working as primary teacher in public schools of the former capital of Brazil, the Federal District. She also participated in a group of Catholic writers of the so-called "spiritualist current", worked as an editor of *Festa* magazine,³ and left the group in 1927.

In 1929, Cecilia Meireles, aged 28 years, took a civil service examination to teach vernacular literature in the Federal District Normal School with the dissertation *Espírito vitorioso* (Victorious spirit). The text advocates a humanitarian education by addressing, in its chapters, the modern school, teacher education, literature and life, the cycle of attempts, and the victorious spirit.⁴ The development of these ideas brought her closer to the New School in the 1930s.

In 1932, she participated as a signer of "Manifesto dos Pioneiros da Escola Nova" (Manifesto of the New School Pioneers) (RECONSTRUÇÃO, 1958), a landmark document that launched the New School ideas in Brazil and sought to influence the educational policy of the provisional government of Getúlio Vargas.

The Manifesto has been the subject of several studies that analyze it and characterize it in various ways such as: element of "combat" (WARDE, 2004; CURY, 2004); up-

1- For consultation and conference of the writings of Cecilia Meireles, I used Meireles (2001).

2- In the 1930s, Cecilia began to sign her last name with a single l. According to the educator, at the time she learned about the Kabbalistic value of the letters, the calculations were not so unfavorable, "but, as there was a letter available, I thought it better to delete it, just in case" (*A Nação*, 1944).

3- *Festa* magazine circulated, in its first phase, from August 1927 to September 1928. The second phase was in 1934. Created by Tasso da Silveira and Andrade Murici, the magazine disseminated modern art, based on the renewal and enhancement of the spirit and not on the anthropophagic rupture (CACCESE, 1971).

4- She ranked second.

to-date document (CURY, 1982; NUNES, 2003); “a watershed” (ATHAYDE, 1932). One of the signers, educator Paschoal Lemme, by attributing a historical character to the document, deplored that the information to solve the education problems was not put into practice (LEMME, 1984, p. 267). Other authors point out the authoritarian character of the Manifesto, which sought to carry out a “modernization from above”, since “it did not break with the authoritarian conceptions that marked the thinking of the time” (XAVIER, 2004, p. 37). Moreover, it has also been seen as a reaction to the verbalistic and artificial educational structure of that period (CAMARA, 2003). Thus one finds different interpretations and studies on this document, which confirm the richness of the educational debates in the period.

From June 1930 to January 1933, Cecília Meireles led a session called *Página de Educação* (Education page) in *Diário de Notícias*,⁵ a newspaper from Rio de Janeiro city. The teacher wrote in the column “Comentário”,⁶ where various topics were discussed – childhood, children’s literature, the concept of freedom, disarmament (antimilitarism), New School, 1930 Revolution, among others. Among the various themes it addressed, here I will devote myself to the writings on religious education.

In her participation in the newspaper, Cecília received positive references from Fernando de Azevedo, who considered her one of the writers in the vanguard of the press of the country, who disseminated and defended the New School. With her writings, she “brought new stimuli and new accents to this campaign, whose content was not exhausted in the cultural plan” (AZEVEDO, 1996, p. 665).

In a letter to Frota Pessoa,⁷ dated May 10, 1931, Fernando de Azevedo acknowledged receipt of *Diário de Notícias*, “whose Education

Page I read every day”. And revealed: “I admire Cecília Meireles more and more: she is now one of the greatest minds in Brazil, at the service of the new ideal of education”.

Undoubtedly, it is possible to ensure that Cecília Meireles had a remarkable presence in the early 1930s journalism. And this is important when we think that, at that historic moment, the press played a prominent role in society as a vehicle of both information and formation of public opinion. As Miceli warns, this becomes evident when we think that the control of the newspapers was one of the main goals of the struggles of various oligarchic factions. These publications represented the interests of these groups to reach or maintain power (MICELI, 2001, p. 54).

In the truncated board of the 1930s, these instruments were pieces of power in the proposition and circulation of political and election discussions, among other topics of interest of the population and especially of the elite. In this field of dispute and consolidation of interests of groups, Cecília Meireles warned of the responsibility of the press when it published information that was “not always accurate” and denounced the manipulation of public opinion, because, due to such manipulation, “people read and are disoriented” (MEIRELES, 23 sept. 1930).

As a journalist and educator, Cecília did not spare the events of the time and recorded impressions and criticisms. Based on the conception of intellectual defended by Jean-Paul Sartre, we can consider that her writings are marked by the historical uniqueness of her being and the universality of her view, or, conversely, the universality of her being and the uniqueness of her views, thought of as two complementary faces (SARTRE, 1994, p. 62). This aspect is present in Meireles’ path as a journalist who criticized the events surrounding education and defended the New School.

In the fabric examined, I consider that her column writings are “necessarily a part of the world by which the entire world manifests without ever unraveling” (SARTRE, 1994, p. 62). By analyzing her articles, this becomes evident

5- Its founders were Nóbrega da Cunha, Orlando Dantas and Alberto Pimentel. This newspaper, founded on June 12, 1930 in the Federal District, supported the Liberal Alliance of Getúlio Vargas (SODRÉ, 1983).

6- “Comentário” column began to be signed in August 1930. Cecília remained until January 12, 1933, when she published “Despedida” (Farewell), on December 1933.

7- Private archive of Alberto Venâncio Filho, apud Penna (1987, p. 140-141).

also in the interviews given in the period. Meireles did not omit to take a position in the face of the events of the time through her writings, often laden with poetic subjectivity, but no less critical.

As a teacher, Meireles strongly believed in the power of education. Not any education, but that organized along the lines of the New School – the reason for her campaign in the journalistic media.

In this sense, her daily column opened a privileged space to convey the New School ideas. While defending a school stuck to reality, she did not hesitate to disseminate the idea that the institution should be “the most neutral territory in the world.” For Meireles, neutrality did not correspond to isolation from the real world. So much so that on several occasions she declared that she favored internationalism and disarmament, attitudes that should pervade education. According to the educator, these attitudes should begin in schools, in the words and actions of teachers, “mainly in acts, because speaking was almost not worth it...” (MEIRELES, 05 Feb.1932).

Bearing that thought in mind, she hoped that schooling historically accelerated Brazil, placing it in a privileged position towards other countries. In Cecilia Meireles, I noted a transit between the ideas that looked into the local and others of universal character. For example, at times, Cecilia considered education an autonomous sphere of reality and a correction agent of economic and social distortions; in others, she saw the dependence on factors external to education as barriers to its potential realization. Anyway, the teacher thought that the development of education should occur far from ideological conditionings, sustained by the neutrality of the subjects who managed it and worked on it.

Old Republic... New Republic: Ink for the poet

With the outcome of the 1930 Revolution, Cecilia Meireles, in her column, praised the revolution, “which has just turned Brazil into

a great hope for the whole world”, constituting “a significantly educational movement” (MEIRELES, 31 Oct.1930).

By expecting a transition that broke with the flawed processes of the old regime, Meireles identified a formidable transformation in that moment. For her, before the revolutionary process, Brazil was marked by oppression, “the government, through all its legalistic representatives, covered social land with an abundant sowing of errors, vices, lies, injustice” (MEIRELES, 31 Oct. 1930). Meireles highlighted that “the greatest miracle of the Revolution had taken place” and, with that, the new government’s opportunity to have as its “fundamental concern to sanitize the moral and social environment of the country” (MEIRELES, 31 Oct.1930).

When Vargas took power, Meireles stated: “the revolution that we desired in order to educate children has been carried out!”. She initially believed that education was guaranteed; after all, “the fatherland is this: a childhood that continuously evolves” (MEIRELES, 07 Dec.1930).

This teacher was confident in the political process and considered the “October Revolution” a “portico to a new age”. She understood that the revolutionaries did not engage in the movement to benefit themselves. In this sense, she secretly harbored the hope that the revolutionary process prioritized the little ones, “to which Brazil belongs with more reason” (MEIRELES, 14 Nov. 1930). Certainly, the government of the red scarves of Vargas would organize the administration of Brazil and, consequently, of the school system.

Her faith in the revolutionary process was gradually lost and, in her writings, the belief in a change that favored children and Brazilians in general faded. A little over a month after the movement that led Vargas to power, Cecilia Meireles recorded in her daily page the statement: “Making revolutions must be for sure much easier than ensuring revolutions” (MEIRELES, 27. Nov. 1930). She went from admiring to criticizing the paths that

the Revolution took, in an attempt to influence its directions. In the face of the facts that came to pass, she wrote tirelessly.

Church and state: A holy alliance for education

It should be remembered that, in the rupture with the Old Republic, the Catholic Church positioned itself alongside the revolutionary forces, with a few hesitations in the institution's hierarchy. A revealing example of the strengthening of the church-state relationship was the support from the Archbishop of Porto Alegre, Dom Becker, to Getulio Vargas. After confirming that there was no communist tendency in the movement of October, he made a favorable statement about it (BEOZZO, 1986, p. 287).

In turn, Getulio Vargas reassured the Catholic Church on the path of revolution. In a letter of November 14, 1930 to D. Sebastião Leme da Silveira Cintra, Archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, he wrote to the "Christian and Catholic consciousness in Brazil". He expressed the pure intentions of the revolutionaries in a "moral and political sanitization", far from any kind of violence (VARGAS, 14 Nov.1930).

It is important to remember that conflicts around the separation of the republican state and the Catholic Church began with the proclamation of the Republic. This was more evident in the educational field, as the Church was the interested party in this area. According to Beozzo, after the split, the Church denounced the separation of the secular state from the Catholic nation and pointed as a major problem the teaching that came to be secular, an act considered a great violence imposed on the Catholic conscience, because the secular character of education conflicted with the faith of the majority of students and with the faith professed by the nation (BEOZZO, 1986, p. 280).

Moreover, according to Cury, the Church understood the world from a crisis based on the separation of morality and religion. At that time, it was necessary to rebuild the world through

discipline, order and humanism of Catholic background. In this sense, with the objective of getting closer to the state, it was said at various times that Catholicism was the national religion. It was hoped that the institution recovered its place next to the power, where it had been during the Empire (CURY, 1988).

With Vargas in power, this time seemed to be ideal for approaching and consolidating interests around education. However, before 1930, the Church had already gained ground in this dispute for education, for example, in Minas Gerais, which was the first state that included religious education in school hours. Initially, in 1928, through an authorization. Later, by a law passed by the legislative branch and signed by the executive branch on October 12, 1929 (BEOZZO, 1986, p. 286).

Brazil advanced in the process of modernization due to an economic transformation, the rapid expansion of industrial activities and the growing importance of urban centers. These changes exerted strong pressure for the implementation of new educational opportunities. And indicated a quantitative leap in the field of education: more schools and more individuals prepared to assume new roles would be needed. After all, due to the prospects of modernization brought about by the Revolution of 1930, there arose "pressure from middle sectors claiming secondary education and even from the lower classes requesting primary education for their children" (BEOZZO, 1986, p. 298).

It was in this open field that the Church intended to act. For this, it organized its intellectuals, especially those of Centro Dom Vital, and engendered a planned action. This Centro was founded in 1922, and its main means of disseminating ideas was *A Ordem* magazine, created a year before. Tristao de Athayde, pseudonym of Alceu de Amoroso Lima, was head of the publication in the period, and ensured it was always "equipped with the arguments collected in the works of the counterrevolutionary thought and the official documents of the latest Catholicism, which gave

coherence to the intention of social reordering on religious grounds” (DIAS, 1996, p. 96).

Given this new relationship between the church and the state, and her distrust in the revolution, Cecilia Meireles took an opposing stance to religious education in public schools. In a letter of May 23, 1932 to Fernando Azevedo, the writer blurted out: “the current to which Mr. Tristao de Athayde belongs acts with the delirium of the unsuccessful, who, in the madness of salvation, can no longer distinguish the nature of their own arguments”. And she added: “I believe – and I would rather be wrong – that these columnists will take a lot of work”, because “it is not easy, nor pleasant, nor practical to discuss with the sick [...] and nearly all incurable”.

Cecilia Meireles incorporated a critical and realistic dimension of the New School, which opposed religious education and assumed the republican separation of state and church. This is evident in the struggle against the ministerial decree that favored religious interests in the educational field.

In the trenches against “that Decree” ...

Decree 19941, of April 30, 1931, which re-established religious education in primary, secondary, and normal school levels, of the then Minister of Education, Francisco Campos, received harsh criticism from Cecilia Meireles. Her newspaper column mocked the “little decree of religious education” and questioned the scope of the reform of the minister by saying that it was below the vaunted objectives of the 1930 Revolution. For the educator, Campos did not bring anything new in his reform. In claiming this, she wrote in her page, “Comentário”:

Mr. Francisco Campos came with his reform bundle in hand. And in each bundle, sharp thorns of taxes. And it was actually one more price reform. *We expected a reform of purposes, ideology, maximum*

education democratization, single school - all those things that we need to know and love before becoming the minister of education... (MEIRELES, 06 May 1931, emphasis added).

Cecilia Meireles raised doubts about the character of the 1930 Revolution and showed her disappointment with its directions. At one point, she asserted:

the current regime, which has invoked Freedom as its patroness so much, puts us in the old routine situations of captivity and delay that, to the astonished eyes of the world, will proclaim, by themselves, the tremendous failure of our unsuccessful revolution... (MEIRELES, 06 May 1931)

In the same article, she ironically demonstrated her revolt: “this is called liberal” (MEIRELES, 06 May 1931). After all, her analysis indicated that:

A little provincial decree, to please some vicars, and attract some sheep... Because one does not believe that any deeply religious spirit – whatever their religious orientation – can receive with joy this Decree in which the most harmful effects on our country and on humanity ferment. (MEIRELES, 06 May 1931).

In turn, the decree was aimed at promoting and sacralizing the approach of the provisional government to the Catholic Church. Before its approval, Francisco Campos argued, in a letter to Vargas dated April 18, 1931, for the need of religious education and the benefits that would be harvested.

For the Minister of Education, this act of the provisional government did not establish compulsory religious education, since this would be optional for students “in accordance with the will of parents or guardians”. And, firm in the broad and liberal purpose of the decision, he

argued that its legal content was not restricted to the Catholic religion, because it allowed the teaching of other religions, “provided that a group of at least twenty students wish[ed] to receive it”. Given that, it not would violate the consciousness of anyone, and it would especially not violate the “principle of neutrality of the state in matters of religious beliefs”.

Francisco Campos also stressed that religious education was already provided in schools. With “the exception of Pedro II, the only secondary school where it is not taught.”

To convince Vargas, the minister assured that this act would not represent a major concession from the Ministry of Education to the Catholic Church. And that its approval “was so beneficial for the improvement of our education system”. This episode reveals the political influence of the religious institution within the Ministry of Education at the time. To seduce Vargas in his letter, Campos also highlighted the “great importance that an act of the nature that I propose will have for the government”, because, if approved, the act would attract an “impressive and enthusiastic movement of support”. And he reiterated as positive the “mobilization of the whole Catholic Church on the side of the Government” with its “valuable and unparalleled influence.”

In a fervent way, Francisco Campos recommend that Vargas sign the decree. In his view, this might represent “the act of greatest political reach” of his government. The letter continued to reinforce the advantages that religious education would entail “for the education of the Brazilian youth”. He sealed the “pact” by saying: “You can rest assured that the Catholic Church will know how to thank Your Excellency for this act”.

When the decree was approved, Centro Dom Vital and *A Ordem* magazine responded positively. The lawyer and devout Catholic Sobral Pinto, for example, considered the act a correction of a historical wrong. And that the decree was nothing more than to return “to the old Brazilian traditions, ominously interrupted by

1889 Republic”. But he warned that it established an offensive equality with the various religious currents, because the Catholic Church, “for being the Truth itself, should not be compared to other religions”, which were mere representatives of error (PINTO, 1931, p. 361).

Tristao de Athayde confidently assessed the scope and need for freedom of religious teaching. He believed that the decree established “in a still very unsatisfactory way the freedom of religious education in public schools.” Even though imperfect, the act was the result of “one of the most significant episodes in this struggle for the spiritual emancipation of America in the twentieth century” (ATHAYDE, 1931, p. IV).

According to the intellectual, the decree was “just the remote glimpse of the ideal we have to achieve.” Therefore, he stated that the time was of struggling and not of unanimity. He called everyone to fulfill their duty as Catholics to support the government act “sincerely, unflinching, despite the serious defects that it has and the provisions, such as the one in the final article, which make the victory obtained against secular sectarianism more than precarious” (ATHAYDE, 1931, p. 94).⁸

Another issue was to ensure its enforcement, so that it was not reduced to

another dead letter in the cemetery of our laws that are not enforced, and so that it [was] indeed the starting point of a new era in our national life, to spare future generations from one of the most disastrous evils that have corrupted our own generation: school without God. (ATHAYDE, 1931, p. 74).

The Catholic intellectual noticed the radicalization of positions against opposite sectors. Thus, he developed a line of argument that affirmed the liberal character of the text based on the issue of freedom. According to Athayde:

8- That tone was also present in the editorial of *A Ordem* magazine, issue 16 of 1931, probably written by Tristão de Athayde, because this text is similar to that published in his book *Debates pedagógicos* (1931).

religious education hinders no freedom, this freedom that “liberals” say they protect every moment. On the contrary, it *defends the freedom of conscience of religious children* and of the families who wish to give their children a religious education and which until now had been deprived of such freedom by the regime of oppressive laicism. (ATHAYDE, 1931, p. 91, emphasis in the original).

The state should understand “all its duty to the Christian ideal of a nationality spiritually formed by Catholicism and that only Catholicism can maintain and develop” (ATHAYDE, 1931, p. 67). This manifestation consistently followed the Encyclical Letter of Pope Pius XI, “*Divini illius Magistri*”, dated December 31, 1929. This papal document presented the educational concerns of the Catholic Church. It criticized the New School proposals such as: “the school called neutral or secular, from which religion is excluded, is contrary to the fundamental principles of education. Moreover, such a school is practically impossible, because in fact it becomes irreligious”. And he warned: “young Catholics are forbidden to attend non-Catholic, neutral or mixed schools, that is, those that are open indifferently to Catholics and non-Catholics without distinction”.

Athayde treated mixed and compulsory for all schools in the same way:

And one cannot admit mixed schools for Catholics (even worse if they are single compulsory for all schools), in which, providing them with religious instruction separately, they receive the rest of the instruction together with non-Catholic students from non-Catholic teachers. (DIVINI..., 31 Dec. 1929).

As an intellectual of the Catholic group in Brazil, Tristao de Athayde demonstrated a strong affinity for the Vatican proposal and he sought to articulate that thought with the Ministry of Education.

On the other side, in the face of the assumptions of religious education, the criticism of Cecilia Meireles found fertile ground. For the educator, the non-acceptance of religious education was based on the fight against the divisions and prejudices that religions caused. Her fear centered on the relationship between the Church and the state, which would lead the latter to be used for “parochial” interests (MEIRELES, 29 May 1931).

This teacher realized that the decree encouraged the attempt to expand power by denominational institutions to areas other than the religious one. In her opinion, this secular institution practiced an “imperialist policy”, regardless of “the processes that it resorted to, provided that it can expand its domains, lending to its God a monstrous shape, because his divinity is nourished by human misery, humiliation and lies, fraud, oppression, and war” (MEIRELES, 29 May 1931).

Cecilia Meireles deemed the decree “anti-educational and anti-social” and Vargas’ signature a serious mistake. For this teacher, modern school should be secular, a term that corresponds to an exemption from religious concerns (MEIRELES, 02 May 1931). But if, on the one hand, this government act sowed discord, on the other, it created the possibility of “Protestants, spiritists, positivist and freethinkers” uniting to annul the decree (MEIRELES, 10 May 1931). This evolved into the much desired fraternity advocated by this educator in several texts published in her column.

Cecilia’s assessment was correct, and the opposition movement was widely supported by freethinkers and opponents of the presence of the Church in the State. This union gave rise to the creation of Pro-Lay State leagues in several places in Brazil.

Aware of the danger that this represented, *A Ordem* stated in its editorial: “there come, side by side, various Protestant sects and also the Jews, Theosophists and Spiritists, arm in arm with their sworn enemies, the Masons and Free Thinkers.” And all this to ensure a ‘common creed’ – the

atheism of the state and an enemy, the Catholic Church” (SEPARATISMO..., 1932, p. 81).

Aware of the role of combative journalism, Meireles discussed and supported several movements in her Education Page. We find, for example, the activities of the Pro-Lay State League, announcing conferences against religious education in public schools. Cecilia defended the initiative of this group on the grounds that it was not a meaningless expression of individuals, as it gathered religious and social doctrines of all stripes, and consisted of “a total of one thousand seven hundred and two corporations”.⁹ And she provocatively said that, to participate in the League, “it is not enough to know by heart the catechism and the prayers of repentance that save the soul from hell...” (MEIRELES, 09 Sep. 1931). In this environment, the Anticlerical League was created in Rio de Janeiro. According to Yolanda Lobo (2010, p. 34),

In response to what it considered disregard for children’s rights, a group of educators (Armanda Álvaro Alberto, Edgar Sussekind de Mendonça, among others) created the Anticlerical League. On invitation of the League, Cecilia gave a lecture in which she recorded her indignation at this “infamous decree”.

There was no ceasefire in Cecilia’s constant fight against the decree. She complained about the silence of the provisional government, highlighting protests by followers of all religions, except the Catholics. She mentioned the demonstrations of students of secondary and higher schools, who deserved “attention from an enlightened government”. Commenting on the possibility of asking for the teaching of other religions in schools, she wrote: “they are waiting for the letters of primary school children... And, as this country

9- The anticlerical newspaper *A Lanterna* reported, from 1933 to 1935, the activities of the Pro-Lay State League in several Brazilian states, which indicated, on October 26, 1933, the union of 1,896 entities among Masonic lodges, corporations, churches, etc (CORPORAÇÕES..., 1933).

is the most exotic one in the world, some day we will not infrequently see even little illiterate children sign a telegram with a small cross” (MEIRELES, 18 June 1931).

In her struggle, she approached the radicalized positions of the belief in republicanism present in the period, and she wholeheartedly stated: “Culture frees. Catholicism enslaves” (MEIRELES, 18 July 1931).

In that spirit, she published, in her journalistic space, a lecture by Edgar Sússekind de Mendonça on education and religion, given at the Anticlerical League (UM TEMA..., 09/10/1931). At another time, to inform her readers about the danger that religious education represented in the public environment, she prepared a review of the work of Francisco Ferrer y Guardia.¹⁰ In the review, she announced the event to remember the 22nd anniversary of the death of this anticlerical educator, murdered by the Spanish government in October 1909, with the consent of the Catholic Church. Organized by the Anticlerical League, the event included the participation of Maria Lacerda de Moura and José Oiticica, both known for their anarchist positions (ANIVERSÁRIO..., 22 Oct. 1931).

In the turmoil of this struggle, Cecilia wrote a letter to Fernando de Azevedo on April 12, 1932. For her, Azevedo represented the possibility of realization of New School ideas within the Revolution and he was the only name able to be the minister of education. Furthermore, she called him “animator of the educational renewal” and highlighted his leadership, especially due to his articulation at the Fourth National Education Conference of Associação Brasileira de Educação (ABE – Brazilian Association of Education), held in December 1931, on the eve of “Manifesto dos Pioneiros...” (MEIRELES, 25 Dec. 1931).

Meireles had had an admiration for Fernando de Azevedo since the reform implemented in Rio de Janeiro, then Federal

10- Further information on this educator can be found in Ferrer (1962), Solà (1978), Dommanget (1972), Tragtenberg (1978), Safón (2003), and Moraes (2006).

District, by this educator in 1927-1930. In her letters, she kept him informed of her “research” on educational policy. In that letter, among other things, she told him about the dinner with minister Francisco Campos and exultantly wrote: “I have subjects for many newspaper columns”.

At this meeting, Cecilia Meireles made several “discoveries”, which she shared with Fernando de Azevedo. One of them was that Francisco Campos assumed he was a fascist; another discovery was about the origins of the decree, which interested the most

for its end rather than for its beginning... In any case, the minister’s explanation was this: because Brazil was in full chaos, he wished to lift it by means of a powerful force, capable of such wonder. He thought of the Catholic organization, and found that Decree of purely political nature. (CARTA, 12 Apr 1932).

Francisco Campos confided to Cecilia Meireles his surprise at the disarticulation of the Church in Brazil. According to Cecilia, the minister found “that there was nothing organized in Brazil” and, amazed, he got the impression that the Church was in ruins. In the letter to Azevedo, Meireles revealed that the minister had told her that “his ideas about Brazil had been transformed. He recognized the mistake he made – not the decree one, but that of the national salvation through it...” (CARTA, 12 Apr. 1932).

Her impression at dinner was that the minister did not seem to be an articulate advocate of the decree, since his thought was “not clear” and had shown “no continuity”. The other interested party, the Catholic Church, through Centro Dom Vital and *A Ordem* magazine, realized and criticized the “hesitation” of the government (EDUCAÇÃO RELIGIOSA, 1931).

Before the meeting, Cecilia had already noticed this minister’s attitude and

she characterized the educational policy of Francisco Campos as confused. She drew attention to the “very subtle purposes” of “Mr. dictator”, which, for her, indicated the fragility that permeated the treatment of “our most serious problems, the most important ones, the most definitive in the formation of nationality and, at the same time, in the peaceful security of the country” (MEIRELES, 18 June 1931).

The correspondence with Fernando de Azevedo shows the content of the struggle with the Catholic front. Tristao de Athayde, for example, was also analyzed by Meireles in a letter of May 23, 1932. In it, she examined the attempts to demoralize the New School by that Catholic writer, who, for Meireles, sought to confuse this educational trend with communism. According to the educator, the intellectual had written “one of his poisonous articles” against Anísio Teixeira. And she regretted that:

Unfortunately, due to the lack of mentality that characterizes our people, the lack of analysis and discussion of any matters that mean opinion, how easily anyone publicly misinterprets the thought of another, with the chorus of ignorance and bad faith so ready to manifest, and so lonely – confusion is actually still a method with a sure outcome among us. (CARTA, 23 May 1932).

In that letter, Cecilia revealed her understanding of Brazilian society at the time and the manipulation of public opinion in favor of conservative mentalities.

Education is full poetry: considerations

At this point of the clash of opinions, Cecilia Meireles emerged as a leading voice in defense of the ideals of the New School and as a critique of the (mis)directions of the 1930 Revolution and of Brazilian education. Her opinions published in column “Comentário” of

Education Page exposed the struggle against religious education, bringing it to the foreground. Her fight against clericalism and her performance for the benefit of the actions of the New School in the Federal District marked her path.

Cecilia was immersed in the debate and followed the pressure of the Catholic Church against Anísio Teixeira's position in the Federal District, who struggled not to allow religious education in public schools. This position attracted the wrath of the institution and of Centro Dom Vital against this educator. Thus, the Federal District became a political battlefield with gains and losses of positions, a path that was taking to the radicalization of positions and the implementation of the 1937 coup.

What was also at stake was maintaining Vargas in power and the success of Pedro Ernesto's administration of the Federal District. With innovative projects, of both social and educational policies, Anísio Teixeira threatened both. Aware of this danger, the maneuvers of Getúlio Vargas led to an alliance with the Catholics and the 1934 Constitution legitimized the Church's participation in the State with registered right (BEOZZO, 1986, p. 340).

By acting in this context, Getúlio Vargas and the Church asphyxiated the initiatives antagonistic to their immediate interests. Thus, they divided the assets: for Vargas, the presidency; for the Catholics, official access to public school. This coordinated action was successful.

However, the action of the pen of Cecilia Meireles, sometimes obscured by her production in literature, cannot be forgotten. At that moment marked by profound discussions, Cecilia Meireles took upon herself the defense and promotion of the New School in the fight

against conservative forces. This woman, writer, journalist and educator, maintained her belief in the revolutionary character of the 1930 movement and in the positive consequences it could bring to education. She took risks and embraced attitudes that can be evaluated as progressive in the combat against religious education, which was considered a castrator of human freedom.

Cecilia Meireles supported a New School full of poetry and advocated education as a place above private interests. She did not fail to sustain a political role for school in society either. For her, school was a privileged space to work on differences and identities, regardless of social classes and religious options. With these principles, she defended her humanist utopia, which kept alive the idea that progress would be achieved through education.

From avowed optimism about to harsh criticism of the provisional government, her actions always interceded in favor of the New School, which, in her view, represented a set of ideas committed to the Brazilian reality, and brought inside the germ of social transformation from the change in attitudes through education.

The study of the path of this educator reveals her coherence with her ideal of a new society. Her belief in the culture and education free of religious ties indicates paths to tolerance and understanding between individuals, a thought essential to our daily challenges, because, for this educator, education is full poetry, full poetry is to be free. After all, "... Freedom [is] a word / that the human dream feeds / that no one can explain / and no one fails to understand...".

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