

The Emperors of Brazil and Freemasonry

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One of the principal achievements of the republican coup of 1889 was the secularization of the Brazilian state, on the model of the United States and France, great inspirations for the institution of a young emerging Republic (which in the end proved harmful, though that is not the object of this article). If the secularization proclaimed by the new form of government was one of its watchwords, it follows that the Empire, then suppressed, had an official religion.

When he dissolved the Constituent Assembly after Independence, Dom Pedro I granted the Imperial Constitution of 1824, which determined the Catholic branch of Christianity to be the official creed, other practices being permitted in the private sphere. He did not forbid them, did not suppress them; he merely conditioned their practice, constitutionally, on not being made public. In this way he revealed a mentality advanced for his time and position, since he limited the juridical reach of Catholicism only to those who felt themselves part of the Roman Apostolic Church. And this may have had a personal reason: Dom Pedro I was a Freemason, and moreover Grand Master of Freemasonry.

Since its institution in the Middle Ages, Freemasonry — which is not a religion but a society, initially secret, of fraternity, whose members swear, besides believing in the Architect of the Universe, to hold to an exemplary secular conduct, and which for full conversion requires initiatory rituals and other practices held to be blasphemous — was combated by the Church. That conflict lasted until the twilight of the medieval period, entered the modern age, and, in the countries that would serve as models for the coup of 1889 (the United States and France), had significant influence. The first American president, General George Washington, and others who took part in the American Revolution, or who would come to occupy the highest office, were Masons. It is naive, therefore, to imagine that Freemasonry exerted no influence upon the Portuguese line that migrated to Brazil in 1808, notwithstanding the fact that they were, obviously, monarchists. Monarchists and legalists alike — which is why Dom Pedro I established, in the Constitution of 1824, the juridical gap that allowed him to be a Mason without conflicts of interest.

In 1872, during the reign of Dom Pedro II, Catholic bishops sought to punish Masons who had been sheltered by Catholic brotherhoods. There was even interference from the Pope, who issued a bull supporting the punishments and demanding that the state do the same. Dom Pedro II thus denied the juridical authority of the Holy See, refusing to punish the members of Freemasonry, to which he did not belong (unlike his father). And for that he had the Constitution of 1824 itself to shelter him, in an episode that became known as the "Religious Question" — and which, ironically, would be used by his opponents to justify the republican coup of 1889, since only with a new form of government would it be possible, in their view, to have a wholly secular constitution, free of foreign religious and political interference, with sovereignty in fact.

Which proved, in the end, entirely untrue.

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