

‘Brazil above everything, God above all’

Ana Carolina Evangelista

Religious influence in the Brazilian state is hardly new, but it has become more evident with the 2018 campaign and subsequent election of Jair Bolsonaro, whose slogan was ‘Brazil above everything, God above all’. It was not the first time a presidential candidate had run a campaign with straightforward religious overtones, but it was the first time such a candidate was elected. Bolsonaro was the first to receive overt support from evangelicals, among whom he won 70% of the vote.¹ But the influence of other Christian groups over his administration has also been enormous, such that a simple opposition between fundamentalist evangelicals and progressive Catholics is misguided. Nuances, dissidences and disputes exist on both sides. However, despite the bases of both having become more conservative in recent years, the main protagonist and beneficiary of this conservative shift has been the evangelical leadership.

The 2018 Brazilian election represented a sea change for the party system that had been in place since the country’s re-democratisation after the military regime in the 1980s. Congress has never been so fragmented – thirty different parties are now represented in it – and the present legislature has the largest number of first-time congresspeople in history. The elections also marked the end of a two-decade pattern in which the main political disputes would take place between party blocs led by the Workers’ Party (PT) and the Social Democrats (PSDB). More surprisingly, the Social Liberal Party (PSL), which in twenty years of existence had elected only one congressperson, suddenly found itself with 52 members of Congress as well as the president himself – who had only been in the party for twenty months when he decided to split and start his own extreme right political grouping, the Alliance for Brazil.² The latter, according to their official statement, intend ‘to fight in the trenches to defend Judeo-Christian values, national sovereignty, democracy, and entrepreneurship as the driving force behind our economy.’

What do these elements mean regarding the relationship between religion and politics in Brazil? Is there a greater coordination between conservative movements in Brazilian politics and, at the same time, a deepening of interaction between Christian political forces? Current Brazilian public debate mostly addresses the influence of evangelicals in politics, but we ought to remember they were neither the first to go into politics, nor are they the only religious group present in the legislative, executive, or judiciary branches. A proper discussion of this issue demands that we understand the characteristics of the different religious groups in Brazilian society and politics today – their profile, composition, demands, presence and territorial expansion – and consider the religion-politics relationship, in Brazil as elsewhere, in greater historical depth.

Evangelicals and religious transition

Brazil officially became a secular state with the creation of the Republic in 1891. However, politicians have always had the Catholic Church as a major ally and have favoured it in several political, administrative acts and decisions.³ Crucifixes have always been prominent in public schools, courthouses and in legislative houses at the municipal, state and federal levels. These are not just symbols, and many legislative houses continue to open their sessions with the sentence: ‘We start our works under God’s protection.’ This phenomenon, which we could name a ‘Catholic occupation’ of the public arena, has most often appeared natural and gone unremarked, in part also due to the absence of any other major religious groups. For as long as this was the case, secularity hardly ever seemed to be an issue. The naturalisation of this link between Catholicism and state power only started coming into question with the growth of evangelicalism.

The latest national survey by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (the 2010 Census) pointed to increasing religious diversification in Brazil, as well as a

steady evangelical growth. Over 40 years, the percentage of evangelicals has gone from 5% to 22%, representing more than 16 million people.⁴ Simultaneously, Catholics, long the overwhelming majority, have significantly declined. The number of those who claim 'no religion' has risen from 1 million people in 1970 to 15 million in 2010.⁵ And the amount of participants in Afro-Brazilian faiths like Candomblé and Umbanda, as well as spiritist movements and global religions such as Buddhism and Islam is also on the rise.

An evangelical belt has emerged in the urban outskirts of Brazil. Although it is growing across social strata, it does so predominately at the base of the social pyramid, in urban and peripheral areas where the population experience a lack of government support and welfare. In this ongoing religious transition, evangelicals do not stand out only for their numbers but also for the intensity of their religious commitment. This is, in short, a growing population that is also more active in its faith in a country with a lapsed Catholic majority.

The evangelical universe is more heterogeneous and broad than usually imagined. The so-called 'Brazilian Evangelical Church', spoken of as a unity, does not exist; what the term supposedly refers to is neither a homogeneous nor a uniform group. It is an assortment of churches and groups whose classifications can be made based on distinct historical and theological heritages, governance models, practices and rituals. It has been estimated there are more than 179,000 evangelical denominations in Brazil – an expression of the autonomous spirit and fissiparous tendencies of the Protestant DNA.

These denominations vary in organisational structure, from the rigidly hierarchical to the horizontal. As for politics, some groups steer clear from it, others pursue covert agendas, a few have open political projects. This is the case of *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* [Universal Church of the Kingdom of God], a Pentecostal church founded in Brazil in the late 1970s and present today in almost a hundred countries. Though far from the most popular, since it began to move into institutional politics Universal has become one of the most visible, and has always had the second or third largest number of representatives in Congress.

Universal is part of a subgroup of pentecostal churches characterised by the use of media outlets to broadcast services, the emphasis on exorcism and divine

healing and looser moral and behavioural codes that associate upward social mobility with devotion and grace.⁶ Such pentecostal churches tend to be intolerant of other religious beliefs, considering them either obsolete or a channel through which demons intervene in the world.⁷ Universal, organised as a business conglomerate, adopts aggressive marketing and communication techniques in order to attract more followers. Its founder and principle leader, Bishop Edir Macedo, controls the church in an entirely vertical manner, controlling over 10,000 temples with 14,000 pastors and millions of believers.

Igreja Universal's political project is overt enough for it to be the subject of Edir Macedo's 2008 bestseller *Plano de Poder* (literally 'A Plan for Power'), in which he talks about awakening 'the numerical potential of Evangelicals' to 'decide any election'.⁸ It is oriented towards increasing the church's sphere of influence through territorial presence, media control and political participation. As a political force, Universal has learned to navigate the Brazilian electoral system rules and has consolidated its legislative presence and influence over administrations at all levels since 1990. Pragmatic, it has worked with progressive and conservative governments alike. Its greatest triumph to date was the 2016 election of former bishop and Macedo's nephew Marcelo Crivella as the mayor of the second largest city in the country, Rio de Janeiro. Deploying a characteristic communication tactic of overestimating the segment's size, Crivella's inaugural speech 'thanked God and the 90% of Evangelicals in Rio de Janeiro'.⁹ As Ari Pedro Oro has argued, its capacity to infuse with new meaning the act of voting and politics in general by means of its institutional charisma has been key to Universal's electoral success – which has, moreover, produced 'a mimetic effect on other evangelical churches'. Combined with the fact that its presence in politics 'has not gone unnoticed' by political parties, this makes it a relevant actor in the current Brazilian political conjuncture.¹⁰

The evangelical segment is not sealed off from the rest of society, nor driven exclusively by faith. Those who are a part of it have demands towards the state and public institutions beyond just religious matters. Public safety, the economic crisis and the fight against corruption, for example, have all been prominent themes among evangelical candidates in the last federal and state elections, reflecting strong demands and preoccupations coming



from their constituencies. It is unlikely that evangelical political leaders could establish themselves if they were not responding to these constituency concerns, and they are certainly attentive to the movements of their base – which they are well positioned to ascertain, given the constant contact at the churches – in order to decide which way they will go. To outsiders, this often only confirms the impression of evangelical voters as a homogeneous, monolithically conservative bloc.

It is misguided, however, to think in such broad terms. A critique of the effects of evangelicalism's growth in political life is possible without generalising about the evangelical segment per se. The problem is not that the evangelical community in Brazil is growing, nor even that this community has come to perceive itself as a political agent. The question is that, among evangelicals, this representation has so far been hegemonised by histrionic conservatives who are less interested in solving the real problems affecting their constituencies than in building political capital out of pursuing a reactionary agenda and

furthering their churches' (and their own) business interests. This does not mean that progressive evangelicals who support a secular state do not or could not exist. The image of the evangelical segment as politically homogeneous and uniformly conservative is at once an optical illusion caused by the fact that the conservative leaders within the community enjoy much greater visibility, and a real effect that follows from the fact that these leaders echo, select and reinforce the most regressive aspects of the constituencies they purport to represent. In other words, it is not a uniform constituency, but is increasingly galvanised politically and ideologically by the effect – also felt among Catholics and other religions – of the conservative politics pushed by some of its leaders.

Catholics and evangelicals in politics

In the course of this demographic transformation in Brazil, the Catholic Church has been losing its central position in society and its privileged access to politics while

a large number of diverse and autonomous evangelical churches, mainly pentecostal, have been gaining ground. This process is partially due to the Vatican's efforts in the 1980s to suppress Liberation Theology, which had been key to the capillarisation of the Catholic Church in the poorest parts of Latin America since the 1960s. The organising work done by this current in ecclesial base communities dotted across the countryside, *favelas* and urban peripheries of Brazil, was essential to an explosion of new social movements witnessed around the end of the military regime. Its fingerprints can be found in the formation of the unions that led the autoworkers strikes of the late 1970s, the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), the Workers' Party and Chico Mendes' Alliance of the Peoples of the Forest. The persecution of prominent figures under the papacy of John Paul II, and a certain demobilisation resulting from the creation of new political outlets for the poor, caused the presence of Liberation Theology to decline. This left a void at once religious and socio-political, given the role ecclesial base communities played in coordinating community initiatives and welfare, which evangelical churches came to fill.

Evangelical participation in institutional politics began in a more systematic and organised manner with the Constitutional Assembly (1986-88) tasked with producing a new constitution after the end of the dictatorship established in 1964. The pentecostal denomination Assembly of God (*Assembleia de Deus*) was the one that made the most significant moves in this direction at the time, responding to rumours that the Catholic Church had plans to make Catholicism the official state religion once again. The growth of evangelical involvement in politics could thus be described as a reaction to Catholic influence.

In the first direct presidential elections after redemocratisation in 1989, some denominations and churches declared support for a candidate: Fernando Collor de Mello, who beat PT's Luis Inácio Lula da Silva in the second round. Some of the arguments used to justify that support – resistance to a supposed communist threat, the fight against corruption, the promise of an 'outsider' who would bring the political system in line with moral values – would resurface in 2018.¹¹ It was at that time that reactions within the evangelical segment began to appear, primarily among protestants, who started constituting the first groupings of an 'evangelical

left'; in doing so, they were in fact reconnecting with an earlier history of protestant liberationist Christianity.¹²

Coincidence or not, the last decade of the 20th century was also marked by a growing engagement of members of the Catholic Church's more conservative movements in party politics and electoral disputes, especially those belonging to the Charismatic Renewal group. Catholics and evangelicals have gone back and forth between competition and cooperation in politics for a long time. They started coordinating more closely in Congress in order to 'defend family values' after the launch of the PT government-sponsored Third National Human Rights Programme (PNDH-3) in 2009. PNDH-3 stirred controversy by proposing a bill (later withdrawn) to fully decriminalise abortion 'on grounds of women's autonomy to decide on matters pertaining to their own bodies' and a number of bills and policies with the purpose of 'ensuring respect for free sexual orientation and gender identity'.¹³ These two issues were the main rallying points for religious groups.

Two figures played an important part in Catholic and evangelical resistance against social movements: Damares Alves, the legislative advisor of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front (FPE) at the time, and Jair Bolsonaro, a federal representative chosen by the FPE to be its main speaker in public hearings against the PNDH-3, and who worked actively as a spokesperson for Catholics and evangelicals in Congress. Today, Damares Alves is not only one of Bolsonaro's main political operators but, as head of what used to be the Ministry for Human Rights – now Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights – she is the most popular member of cabinet and increasingly discussed as a potential vice-presidential pick for the 2022 elections.

Resistance to the PNDH-3, particularly to the decriminalisation of abortion and the criminalisation of homophobia, became an important issue in the 2010 presidential campaign and, even though evangelical leaders had until then enjoyed a mutually beneficial working relationship with PT, would increasingly become a focal point for the opposition to Lula's replacement, Dilma Rousseff.¹⁴ The most notable incident in this regard, which would mark an inflection in the relationship between religious leaders and the PT and become the first major victory for the religious right, was the Catholic and evangelical campaign against the Ministry of Education's guidelines

for teachers on gay students and homophobia. Pejoratively nicknamed 'the government's Gay Kit', they became a source of a moral panic and numerous fanciful stories which have regularly recurred since then – not least the one about the 'penis-shaped milk bottle', which set WhatsApp ablaze in the run-up to the 2018 elections. Rather than standing its ground and dispelling myths, the government recalled it before it was ever distributed and, two years later, supported evangelical pastor Marcos Feliciano's bid for the presidency of the Human Rights Committee in the lower house.¹⁵ Instead of being appeased, the religious right smelled blood and Catholic and evangelical collaboration in the 2014 elections extended to areas like education and public safety, even though their commonalities in these were smaller. Although many continued to be part of PT's coalition until after Rousseff's re-election, most would jump ship in time to support her impeachment. In 2018, many would support Bolsonaro against Fernando Haddad, Minister of Education at the time of the 'Gay Kit' scandal, relishing the opportunity to mobilise the same stories against him.

The Brazilian electorate's turn to the right, which had been sensed for the first time in the 2014 elections, continued to grow in the 2016 municipal elections and, in light of the collapse of the traditional right, turned to the far right in 2018.¹⁶ Misogyny, punitivism, militarism and anti-Left sentiments were brought into different institutional arenas and combined. Under Bolsonaro, the link between religion and politics has become even more explicit. His cabinet is full of proactive Christian figures, both Catholic and evangelical, who promote a neoconservative religious agenda. 'The time has come for the church to occupy the nation' was how Damascos Alves recently described the new conjuncture.¹⁷ For Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo, in turn, 'Christian values should be back at the core of how we see the world'.¹⁸ In less than two years, the Ministry of Education has been fronted by three 'proud Christians' (two Catholic, one evangelical).

Yet a reaction to the conquest of rights by certain groups was not the only reason for the rightward turn in the last elections. The country that went to the polls in 2018 had the highest unemployment rate in recent history and one of highest homicide rates in the world, with the majority of victims being young, black, poor and living in urban peripheries.¹⁹ It was also going through

a moment of extreme institutional discredit, with 62% of the population believing 'the System' was broken beyond repair.²⁰

Politicians – religious *and* non-religious – mobilised the language of religion to propose a response to the daily problems faced by the vast majority of the population amidst the worst crisis the country had faced in decades. It offered belonging and the prospect of a return to order, predictability, safety and unity. With this package were tied the interests – political and financial – of religious groups and their leaders. In this conjuncture, their message swayed millions who had voted for the Left in the recent past. For the Left to simplify this process by presuming a homogeneous religious vote or a uniformly conservative evangelical segment is not only analytically incorrect, but politically catastrophic. It disregards complex motivations and concrete realities, stigmatises a huge fraction of the working classes with whom it must communicate, pre-empts efforts to deepen our understanding of and engagement with this sector, and hands the language of religion entirely over to a conservatism that has thus far proved very adept at using it to build symbolic and affective ties with the poor.

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Notes

1. See Jairo Nicolau, *O Brasil Dobrou à Direita. Uma Radiografia da Eleição de Bolsonaro em 2018* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2020), 76.
2. Departamento Intersindical de Assessoria Parlamentar, *Novo Congresso Nacional em Números. 2019-2023* (2018).
3. Maria das Dores Campos Machado, 'Religião, Cultura e Política', *Religião e Sociedade*, 32(2), 2012, 29–56.
4. 'Protestant' here includes people who identify with historical mainline and evangelical protestant denominations, those who belong to pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God and the Foursquare Church, and members of independent churches, thousands of which are neopentecostal, like Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus.
5. These appear in the Pew Research graph as 'unaffiliated'. See Pew Research Center, 'Roman Catholics in Decline, Protestants on the Rise. Brazil's Changing Religious Landscape', 18 July 2013, 2.
6. Prosperity Theology is a fast-growing movement frequently

associated with Pentecostalism, Evangelicalism and Charismatic Christianity. It centres around the idea that believers are able to transcend poverty and/or illness through devotion and that material success is a sign of grace.

7. One of the several bestsellers penned by Igreja Universal's Bishop Edir Macedo was a 1997 book accusing Afro-Brazilian religions of being 'demonic sects'. According to the author, these religions are the source of diseases, disputes, addictions and other evils in people's lives. It is no coincidence that it was relaunched in 2019, when authoritarianism and religious intolerance gained space in public debate. In Bolsonaro's first six months in power, reported cases of religious intolerance were up by 56% in relation to the same period in 2018, the majority against Afro-Brazilian religions. See Maria Duarte de Souza, 'Denúncias de Intolerância Religiosa Aumentaram 56% no Brasil em 2019', *Brasil de Fato*, January 21 2020, <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2020/01/21/denuncias-de-intolerancia-religiosa-aumentaram-56-no-brasil-em-2019>.

8. Edir Macedo, *Plano de Poder. Deus, os Cristãos e a Política* (São Paulo: Thomas Nelson, 2008), 18.

9. Andrea Dip, *Em Nome de Quem? A Bancada Evangélica e seu Projeto de Poder* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2018), 28.

10. Ari Pedro, 'A Política da Igreja Universal e Seus Reflexos nos Campos Religioso e Político Brasileiros', *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 53:18 (2003), 62.

11. See Ricardo Mariano and Antonio Flavio Pierucci, 'O Envolvimento dos Pentecostais na Eleição de Collor', *Novos Estudos Cebrap* 34:3 (1992), 92–106.

12. See Michael Löwy, *The War of Gods. Religion and Politics in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1996), 108ff.

13. See http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_Ato2007-2010/2009/Decreto/D7037.htm. In Brazil abortion is only legal (and freely available in the public health system) in case of rape, anencephaly or life-threatening risk for the mother.

14. Antônio Flávio Pierucci, 'Eleição 2010: Desmoralização Eleitoral do Moralismo Religioso', *Novos Estudos* (2011), 5–15.

15. Now a federal representative for the third time, Marco Feliciano is a pastor in one of the churches in the Assembleia de Deus denomination, the largest in Brazil, and one of the main spokespeople for the 'pro-life', 'pro-family' religious lobby.

16. See Nicolau, *O Brasil Virou à Direita*; Ronaldo Almeida, 'Bolsonaro Presidente'.

17. Karina Gomes, 'É o Momento de a Igreja Ocupar a Nação', diz Damares Alves', *Deutsche Welle*, February 28 2020.

18. 'Bolsonaro's foreign envoy says he favours Trump and Netanyahu', *Financial Times*, June 24 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/c0215762-9106-11e9-aea1-2b1d33ac3271>.

19. See Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, *Atlas da Violência* (2019), https://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/images/stories/PDFs/relatorio_institucional/190605_atlas_da_violencia_2019.pdf. The World Health Organisation considers homicide rates above 10 per 100,000 inhabitants to be epidemic. In 2017, Brazil recorded 31.6 deaths per 100,000 thousand inhabitants – double the rate of Iraq in 2015, for example.

20. *Edelman TRUST BAROMETER Global Report* (2017), <https://www.slideshare.net/EdelmanInsights/2017-edelman-trust-barometer-global-results-71035413>.

