From the community of faith to politicized religiosity

Political instrumentalization of religion in Brazil[1]

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Abstract
The religious experience of people in Brazil has been undergoing accelerated transformations for a few decades. Roman Catholicism ceased to be the official religion almost a century and a half ago, and the country had many of its traditional social contexts challenged by modernization processes. The consequence, however, has not been the secularization of the public sphere nor the massive abandonment of the cultivation of faith, but the pluralization of the ways of living it, the sources from which it is nurtured and the goals to be achieved with it. Most people have begun to commit themselves less to religious organizations and doctrines and adopt an autonomous election of diverse and individualized selection of religious elements that satisfy their spiritual and even material desires and needs, replacing the bond with a community of faith with the experience of a particular and specific religiosity. They have increasingly come together more by virtue of affinity and a religiously based political militancy than of traditions, ethics or hopes informed by a religion. The text seeks to contribute to the understanding of this transformation.

Keywords: Religious organizations; religious diversity; spirituality; individualization; political instrumentalization

Introduction

Brazil constituted its public institutions in close connection with the Roman Catholic Church and maintained these ties even after the formal separation between church and state. Even after the military regime, when it was reconstituted with its new Federal Constitution in 1988, it did not define itself as a lay state. In the words of the constitution framers, their activity took place "under

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the protection of God" (preamble to the Federal Constitution). They deemed it appropriate to establish that the state and its federated entities "are forbidden to: I – establish religious sects or churches, subsidize them, hinder their activities, or maintain relationships of dependence or alliance with them or their representatives" (Art. 19-I). But they made an important proviso: if there is "public interest" and some provision in law, this prohibition is suspended.

Perhaps due to this constitutional ambiguity, it is often believed that in the Brazilian republic there is a separation between church(es) and state, or even that the state and its government are lay. For example, Justice Luiz Fuchs, of the Federal Supreme Court, stated this in 2021: "Judges can have their options, they can be married, have children, grandchildren. The judge cannot take their values to court, which are not constitutional values. The state is lay. You may believe what you want, but I am a judge of the Constitution."[3] On the other hand, there is an opposite trend underway, which precisely links personal religiosity with public institutions. Few have expressed it publicly as clearly as the President of the Republic, Jair Bolsonaro: "We are a government that believes in God, that defends the family and that owes loyalty to its people. It was certainly faith that saved us in the past, elected us and keeps us alive in government to this day. If it weren't for Him, our God, how would we resist so much adversity with much of the press against us? It's faith!"[4]

While in the speech mentioned above a connection was established with the ruler's personal career and the faith of those governed, reinforced by the expression of a messianic conviction of having been elected by God, at another moment a curious and obviously unconstitutional relationship of voluntary subordination of the government to a specific group of leaders is expressed in the following statement: "But, as I believe in God, if we were to be on the other side, we would not have been chosen. I say 'we' because the responsibility lies with all of us. *I will lead the nation in whatever direction you wish*." [5] These examples show that Brazil has recently had

[3] Retrieved from www.brasil247.com/regionais/brasilia/fux-manda-recado-a-andre-mendonca-e-diz-que-ninguem-pode-levar-suas-crencas-pessoais-para-a-suprema-corte on August 31, 2023.

[4] Statement made on April 4, 2022 at the foot of the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro. Retrieved from www.brasil247.com/brasil/acossado-por-escandalos-bolsonaro-ignora-casos-de-corrupcao-e-diz-que-seu-governo-sobrevive-pela-fe on April 4, 2022.

[5] Statement made on March 8, 2022 to evangelical leaders gathered in the presidential palace by businessman-pastor Silas Malafaia. Retrieved from *Folha de S. Paulo*, March 9, 2022, p. A7 (emphasis added). Shortly before that, at the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the International Church of God's Grace, he had already declared that "The

relationships of dependence and alliance between government officials and certain religious leaders, which are not always in compliance with current law nor with the concept of separation between government institutions and religious organizations, as established by presidential order 119-A at the founding of the republic[6].

In this text I discuss in broad terms the path of transformations in the religious experience of a large part of the Brazilian population. I begin by analyzing how the concept of *belonging* to a faith community, structured through a corpus of teachings and ritualized practices and which provided support and ethical guidance for everyday life, became no longer binding for a significant portion of church members. These bonds were replaced by *religiosities* freely and individually composed like mosaics.

Next, I highlight changes in the relationship between religion and political power. This relationship has always accompanied Christianity in Brazil, but nowadays it has lost its discretion and revealed itself as a reciprocal instrumentalization, of which the statements reproduced above are an undisguised testimony. This instrumentalization has two unevangelical characteristics: on the one hand, it is much more beneficial to the private political and economic objectives of those involved than to the religious dimension; on the other, it occurs in a context in which religious leaders increasingly give up something that was – at least originally – essential to Christianity, viz. being a religion of salvation[7], in order to focus, instead, on promises of earthly prosperity. It is precisely the disconnection from a faith community, in which one can find ethical guidance for daily life and support for the discernment of spirits, and a mosaic-type religiosity made up randomly of symbolic elements without consistency between them is what renders individuals vulnerable to political instrumentalization.

country is lay but the President is a Christian." See "Joaquim Barbosa diz a aliados que vê Moro com desconfiança," *Folha de S. Paulo*, January 12, 2022, p. A7.

6 See www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/decreto/1851-1899/d119-a.htm. Retrieved on August 20, 2023. Either by carelessness or neglect, between January 1991 and December 2022 the extinguishment of the patronage and the proclamation of religious freedom were abrogated.

7 By "religion of salvation" I understand, in a relationship of elective affinity with Max Weber's definitions (*Religion und Gesellschaft*, 2006, pp. 184ff.), a double dimension: a religion of salvation must propose a response to what transcends the limit of physical life and offer guidelines for daily behavior that claim to be in accordance with that salvation.

One faith, one parish

Christianity was established as the predominant religion in Brazil first in the Roman Catholic version, in close connection with political power, and then complemented by minorities of historical Protestantism and of Pentecostalism. These traditions advocated the experience of faith in community.

Even though the territory that would come to be known as America had a great plurality of peoples, with very diverse cultures, with the arrival of Columbus and Cabral, a mentality of divine sending for colonization began to be formed in Europe: the Roman Church legitimizes the occupation of the territory in exchange for support for the establishment of Catholicism (Dussel, 1993). The violence of the methods used and the scope and speed of the destruction reported by Bartolomé de las Casas (2011) as early as 1552 could and should have shown every European Christian how little evangelical this undertaking was. In the case of Brazil, the cooperation system implemented was called *patronage* (Xavier and Olival, 2018). The political power was responsible for financing the church's activity, but ensured itself the right to influence the creation of the ecclesiastical structure and to have the final word on the church's orders and guidelines.

Until the end of colonial domination, higher schools, books influenced by liberalism and newspapers were prohibited. The restricted access to education and other cultural assets, as well as little concern for religious education, show that the patronage system left evangelization in the background. The very precarious religious upbringing, despite the high ritualization of the calendar and religious life, and the difficulty of the Roman Church in structuring itself led to the flourishing of syncretic practices known as popular Catholicism (Gaeta, 1997). Behind rituals of Roman Catholic origin, popular Catholicism freely mixed religious views of indigenous and African origin brought by slaves, in addition to some elements of spiritualism.

Changes in the economic structure that accompanied the end of slavery and the spread of evolutionary and racist concepts that considered Europeans to be biologically more developed than other peoples were a pretext to promote the recruitment of white immigrants, including Protestants. It aimed, at the same time, to improve the mode of production in agriculture and to whiten the population. As a consequence, from 1815 onwards Protestant immigrants arrived in Brazil. Even though they were not allowed to practice their religion publicly and worship acts were

not recognized for civil purposes, immigrants established evangelical Protestant communities in different regions, reproducing, even in precarious conditions, parish models brought along with their faith (Prien, 1989). In addition to immigration, missionary activities linked to historic Protestantism were also encouraged. They resulted in new communities of faith whose members, for the most part, had converted to the new faith. In this way the practice of moving from one religious tradition to another started.

The proclamation of the Republic brought about the formal separation between state and religious institutions, instituted a calendar without religious holidays and banned religious education in schools (see Diel, 2019). This put a partial end to a four-century alliance between throne and altar. It was partial because the same decree (Art. 6) established that the government would continue to finance current expenses and training in seminaries of the Roman Church. Historical Protestantism gained freedom to act publicly in matters of faith, but did not receive equal treatment in public funding.

With the abrupt ordering of the end of the patronage system, both the Catholic Church and Brazilian civil life were disrupted, and both took years before they managed to reorganize themselves. In this reorganization, the Catholic Church strongly Romanized itself, reinforced the fight against what it considered to be secularism and adopted a discourse about Brazil as a Catholic country – at the same time as it reinforced popular Catholicism by creating pilgrimage centers and religious celebrations.

During the authoritarian regime of Getúlio Vargas, between 1930-1945, the alliance between the Roman Church and the government was partially reestablished. The church received greater financial support to structure itself and the right to reintroduce Catholic religious education in schools (Cury, 1993). A movement that flourished during this period with the support of the Roman Church was integralism, whose motto was God, fatherland and family. In the effort to re-Catholicize Brazil, a magazine was created (Velloso, 1978) and the establishment of Catholic organizations such as political parties, trade unions as well as civil organizations of mutual support was encouraged. In elections, lists of candidates recommended by the Roman Catholic hierarchy were formed. Even the donation of the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro by the Roman Church is part of the defense of a Catholic Brazil. Bruneau (1974) stresses that re-Catholicization did not occur due to a revival of faith and a strengthening of the teaching of

Christian doctrine, but through an approximation to state power. In 1964, at the beginning of the military regime, this alliance was reinforced again with the Roman Church's explicit support of the military coup that would supposedly save the country from communism and protect the family.

Specifically regarding the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB), its formation as a nationally organized church lasted a whole century: from the 1860s, when the first synod was created, until 1968, when the federation of synods became a church. German immigrants in general, and Protestants in particular, had great difficulty integrating into civil life as citizens of their new country – both due to their own resistance and to difficulties imposed by the environment. When creating the federation of synods – the embryo of the IECLB – in 1948, however, it was emphatically claimed that the new organization would be an evangelical church in Brazil, "with all the consequences that this implies." This was not a search for proximity or alliance with political power, but the expression of a view on co-responsibility for the political-civil issues of this society.

Significant for this insertion of the IECLB in Brazil was the episode of the cancellation of the assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, which was to be held in Porto Alegre, under the pretext that President General Médici had been invited to the opening ceremony (Sobottka, 1985). Interestingly, this argument was first raised by the church of the German Democratic Republic. Reflection on this incident led the IECLB to publish a document known as the "Curitiba Manifesto," which included criticism of the military regime of that time (cf. Burger, 1977). The episode as a whole can be seen retrospectively as the milestone of the transition from a church reasonably alien to the civil-political sphere to a critical and engaged church, advocating human rights, land reform and non-payment of external debt. This was a transition "from the ghetto to participation", in the words of Rolf Schünemann (1992), without establishing an alliance with governments, not even when one of its members, General Ernesto Geisel, held the Presidency of the Republic.

In addition to the establishment of faith communities and the consolidation of organizational structures of traditional Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity, other developments in the religious field must be highlighted, as they have an impact on religious life in Brazil: the emergence of Pentecostalism and religions of African origin, as well as the proliferation of religious organizations focused on the market of symbolic goods.

New spirits blow in the country

Just over 110 years ago, a new branch of Christianity was established in Brazil: Pentecostalism (Freston, 1995). For almost half a century this movement, which became present above all in geographically, religiously and socially peripheral regions, grew moderately. It developed a strong sense of community and also a notable change in the converts' conduct of life. Internally, it became fragmented and strengthened proselytism, so that it began to be seen both by traditional churches and sometimes by their respective mother congregations as a competitor. A characteristic of this period was Pentecostalism's distance from and sometimes even aversion to politics (Mariano, 2010). Voting is mandatory in Brazil and there was no refusal to vote by Pentecostals. But any political involvement that went beyond that was avoided. Two conceptions contributed to this stance: a perception of politics as a contaminant and the conviction that earthly life is totally relative vis-à-vis the true life that is to come – or afterlife.

In the 1950s, missionaries from the USA founded Pentecostal churches considered second generation churches. Glossolalia, until then thought of as the most visible sign of baptism with the Spirit, was complemented by the emphasis on other dimensions of the gospel, especially faith healing. The main driver of this movement was the Foursquare Gospel Church, founded in the USA in 1923, but only later brought to Brazil. In this new variant of Pentecostalism, the power to heal and perform miracles was considered the decisive visible sign of both the receiving of grace and the minister's power. Several other churches, such as Brasil para Cristo and Deus É Amor, are close to this theological orientation. Even though they form congregations, these churches are less demanding regarding the daily ethical conduct of believers.

In this scenario of diverse religious formation in Brazil, it is also necessary to remember that at the end of the 19th century the first spiritualist groups were created in Brazil. This movement believes in spiritual and intellectual evolution through successive reincarnations, ascribes great value to works of charity and is very active in the consumption and production of literature. Even though it understands itself as a religious movement, spiritualism – in contrast with all the forms of Christianity mentioned so far – does not claim exclusive adherence. This movement gained great momentum from the 1930s onwards, spreading even among different churches, especially among socially well-established people, causing multiple religious belonging to proliferate.

From the 1930s onwards, the movement known as Umbanda grew (Ortiz, 1978). It incorporates many elements of popular Catholic religiosity, of various African traditions, particularly Candomblé, as well as of spiritualism and, in some cases, also of indigenous cultures. Both Umbanda and Candomblé, which is more strongly African, initially did not seem themselves as religions but rather as cultural expressions. Restrictions and police persecution led these movements to define themselves as religion in order to enjoy the protection that the law guaranteed to religions. Like in the case of spiritualism, few followers of Candomblé and Umbanda declared either one of them to be their religion. Most of them continued to consider themselves Roman Catholics or members of a Protestant church. In recent years, with the strengthening of the fight against racism, some believers have found religion of African origin to be a central dimension of their identity, whereas others consider the link with Africa to be central to their identity as black people, relativizing the religious dimension.

Afro-Brazilian religions are not salvation religions or ethical religions. Guidance on practical issues of everyday life as a part of religion is not part of their corpus. This does not mean that people linked to them do not experience ethical principles similarly to other social groups; it simply means that these principles are not provided by religion qua religion as linked to some form of salvation. The sources of their ethics come from other spheres of life.

Prosperity as a blessing

Towards the end of the 1970s, a new movement emerged in the Brazilian religious scene: dissidents from Pentecostal churches began to create their own religious organizations, influenced by prosperity theology. This current claims that Christians are destined for material well-being, a healthy life, happiness and success in everything they do (Mariano, 1996). The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and the International Church of the Grace of God were the pioneers of this movement, which many call neo-Pentecostalism. The movement has roots in teachings by Essek W. Kenyon and Kenneth Hagin (Hagin, 2013; see Bowler, 2013). It advocates the Christian's power to command the devil and other evil powers to keep away; puts concrete everyday problems center stage; interprets the relationship with God as a reciprocity contract; establishes a direct relationship between the intensity of faith and the magnitude of the graces obtained; it sees

believers at the center of a force field between divine power and the powers of evil, in the midst of a constant spiritual war to ward off the evil spirits that prevent them from receiving blessings.

At worship services, it is not uncommon for a direct relationship to be established between proof of faith and the value of donations made to the organization, the so-called willingness to sacrifice. Ultimately, if the believer is not willing to donate everything to the organization trusting that God will bless them and reward them with multiple times the value of the sacrifice, their faith is weak and they will fail. With the exception of the need for sacrifice, there are practically no ethical guidelines for everyday life. In the specific case of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, there is a gradual abandonment of the New Testament and a "return" to specific aspects of ancient Judaism – including the construction of a huge temple called Solomon's Temple, supposedly built mostly with materials coming from Palestine and housing a replica of the Ark of the Covenant, which is defined as "the most important thing in the world."

Popular religiosity was widely integrated into these organizations, ethical requirements were practically completely abolished and faith was basically limited to earthly life. At the center of the believer's concern, in addition to prosperity, they place the spiritual war against Satan, the fallen angels and entities of African origin (the *orixás*), because they are supposedly the ones that stand in the way between believers and their achievements (Silva, 2007). Additionally, there is a strong use of media at an intensity never seen before and the construction of a discourse that defines the religious organization as the mediator between the believer's sacrifice and divine blessing[8]. As a result, these organizations have become service providers, trade centers for exchanging material resources for symbolic goods, for religious comfort and the promise of material rewards to be provided by "Jesus" or "god" (Bazanini and Machado Junior, 2018). For the most part, they do not create congregations as Christian churches traditionally do; their clientele is more fluid and often only seeks help for specific problems while the latter persist.

[8] A worship service of January 2021 (https://youtu.be/xKj8WmVpVHw) referring to Luke 16:19-31 and broadcast online is paradigmatic. The connection between offering and blessing is already established at the second minute and is repeated many times. In the last 25 minutes, it is intensified during the many offerings aimed at receiving blessings: regular offerings, offerings for special wishes, envelopes for sacrifices to be brought at coming worship services. During the broadcasting of the whole worship service, a QR Code is shown, referring to www.universal.org/doar, with instructions about easy ways to make deposits in accounts of five banks and other donations.

If we take Jesus' words seriously according to which speakers are known by their fruits, it is very difficult to still recognize in these neo-Pentecostal organizations anything substantial that allows us to consider them as part of Christianity or as churches. They are, without a shadow of a doubt, important Brazilian religions, but the good news of the gospel of salvation through grace and faith and the hope of a future after death are no longer part of this religiosity and are replaced by exchange relationships.

Currently, the Pentecostal family as a whole accounts for approximately one third of Brazil's population. Historical Protestantism, on the other hand, has not significantly expanded in terms of numbers. Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and Anglicans established congregations, founded schools and later even institutions of higher education, but continue to be niche churches. Lutheran churches, due to their choice not to encourage conversions, have grown vegetatively, while they have become internally structured. And in recent years they have been declining in membership.

Religious transit and self-constructed religiosity

For believers of African traditions, for followers of spiritualism and increasingly also for many people socialized in Christian congregations, religious affiliation is seen less and less as an inheritance to be valued. It is being replaced by a *religiosity* which to a large extent is self-constructed and constantly reconstructed. It is only loosely linked to an institutionalized community or confession and follows completely individual intuitions and preferences. In part, it is a *result-oriented* religiosity: it incorporates religious services (prayers, blessings, promises) from very different agencies in the faith market, which show themselves – or at least promise – to be capable of solving everyday problems in the different spheres of life. These services will be pragmatically demanded or abandoned according to their ability to respond or not to present needs.

An important dimension of this religiosity is well-being, feeling good. Like cherries plucked from different sweets, disconnected religious elements are collected in an unsystematically and uncommitted way to subjectively make up personal *belief*. As an example, I quote a statement (transcribed from an informal conversation):

I'm Catholic and I like some things about Catholicism. I think the liturgy is beautiful. But I also like the rhythms of the songs in the evangelical church X, which is close to where I live. I go there whenever I can. But my spirit is restless and wants to communicate beyond the limits of this

passage through the earth; it knows it has a mission to fulfill. That's why I'm interested in some things about the spiritualist doctrine (Higher-level professional, 45 years old).

Mello and Oliveira (2013) argue that belief in spirits, be they deities, ancestors or other beings, and in their manifestations is a central characteristic of Brazilian culture. This belief is handled in a pragmatic way and incorporated into everyday life, without asking where the components of this religiosity come from and whether they are compatible with each other. Anthropologist Gilberto Velho (2003, p. 25) reinforces this thesis by describing the Brazilian population as mostly Catholic, rehashing spiritualist places of worship, practicing Umbanda and Candomblé rituals, and attending neo-Pentecostal worship services. Protestants, Jews, atheists and agnostics do the same. The problems that are brought to these service-providing organizations can be diverse: illness, unemployment, health issues, love, wishes that seem difficult to get. These spirits can come from the most varied traditions, including indigenous, African, Christian traditions, and can be both "good" spirits or spirits "of light," which help and do good, as well as "dark spirits", when one wants something bad to happen to someone, out of prejudice, dislike or even revenge.

Multiple religious affiliation or belonging – that is, people who claim to be linked to more than one religion at the same time – is a common phenomenon in Brazil. People feel simultaneously connected to more than one religious family without being attached to any of them. Perhaps it would be better to say: without the respective religious organization being capable of retaining their loyalty or guiding their daily lives.

Increasingly, Brazilians *transit* or move around in search of solutions to specific problems or a temporary spiritual home in which they can recover from a spiritually confused, disoriented life. For them, it is not necessary to draw a clear dividing line between the *inside* and *outside* of a faith community, between being members of a community or congregation and or just clients-users of services exchanged for financial support. The search is a specific one and the relationship that is formed is pragmatic, focused on solutions.

In the construction of the individualized religiosity of a large portion of the Brazilian population, the respective situations are interpreted dually: from a material and from a spiritual point of view, with the spiritual dimension being decisive. This is particularly evident in the face of difficulties (illness, relationship problems, unemployment, etc.). The search for religious solutions in everyday life is primarily described as "casting out" the evil spirit that causes suffering or at least

prevents benevolent spirits from having a positive effect on the person. This does not exclude, for example, looking for health care services and taking medication in case of illness. The interpretation of a cure, however, is most likely seen as a result of the relationship with the spirits.

From what has been discussed so far, it should be clear that the Roman Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal Christianity implanted in Brazil – and, to a lesser extent in numerical terms, other religious phenomena as well – until the middle of the 20th century had as a striking characteristic that it sought to bring together people to form congregations, for the experience of faith and guidance in everyday ethics. The ways of living and expressing this faith were very diverse. The links with political power were also very diverse, ranging from total intertwining in the patronage regime in Roman Catholicism to the neglect typical of Pentecostalism, through elective affinities in the case of mission Protestantism and an almost indifferent parallelism in immigration Protestantism. This Christianity is stagnant and even declining proportionately. Afro-Brazilian religions and neo-Pentecostalism were more sensitive in grasping the spiritual dimension of the Brazilian cultural matrix, but increasingly restrict their practices to the immanence of earthly life and a very fleeting relationship between the religious organization and people seeking spiritual nourishment. Between these two poles – a stagnant Christianity and religions of immanence – a mosaic, multicolored, self-constructed religiosity flourishes vigorously.

From prophetic voice to strategic ally of political power

After analyzing transformations that occurred in the religious experience of a large portion of the Brazilian population, where belonging to a community of faith that is structured and provides ethical guidance for everyday life was replaced by religiosities made up of freely and individually by more and more people, I want to address a radical transformation in the relationship of churches and related organizations with politics and political power. Although the disconnection of the experience of faith in a community or congregation and the formation of individualized religiosities without a communal or congregational commitment are not the only cause of the penetration of political power in the spaces of religions, they have great mutual affinities. The former one provided a fertile ground for the latter to develop. But it is important to distinguish two forms of relationship between religion and politics: on the one hand, faith experienced in a community or congregation as a mobilizing and ethical guiding force for the political engagement of citizens and, on the other,

the swinging of political support in spaces of religions for projects that are not anchored in the teachings of the respective religion or even contradict them.

The concerns of the 1960s also reverberated in Brazilian churches and contributed to a growing mobilization in the political sphere. In Protestantism, various theological influences converged, such as theology of hope and theology of revolution (see Shaull, 1967), in addition to the activities of ecumenical organizations. A pioneering initiative was the Northeast Conference of 1962, promoted by the Evangelical Confederation of Brazil, under the motto "Christ and the Brazilian revolutionary process" (Dias, 2012). Following the Second Vatican Council and the Episcopal Conference of Medellín in 1968, liberation theology developed, leading to the formation of thousands of base ecclesial communities and profound changes in the churches themselves (Boff, 1987). The Latin American Theological Fraternity (Padilla, 1991) contributed to political engagement among more moderate sectors in evangelical churches. Together, these transformations led to a strengthening of ecumenical activity and an involvement of broad segments of the various Christian churches in political issues, motivated by their faith and with a clear progressive orientation.

The cold war climate of the time, fostered by military regimes established on the subcontinent, led to a situation in which criticism of human rights violations, the defense of democracy and insistence on public policies such as land reform, housing and employment – understood as a Christian calling to raise a prophetic voice – provoked reactions and internal tensions in the churches and with political institutions, including cases of repression[9].

Most Brazilian Protestant churches maintained a critical distance from political power, expressed in repeated public statements criticizing situations of injustice and emphatically defending basic reforms. They did an intense re-reading of the Bible and their traditions in search of support for the political involvement of Christians as Christians for a more just, democratic and inclusive world (see Schünemann, 1992). A significant part of this engagement even led to activities in opposition political parties – even in segments of Protestant and classical Pentecostal Christianity (see Deiros, 1986). The literature on social movements of that period, on the new federal

[9] In 1973, at the height of repression, some churches published the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with Bible verses for each paragraph, without additional comments. This publication was confiscated by the military dictatorship prior to its dissemination.

Constitution constructed between 1986 and 1988 and on political parties in Brazil is full of analyses of the importance of this engagement of Christians motivated by their faith and supported by their institutions in the construction of a democratic project for the country. But unlike the revolutionary tone adopted at the Northeast Conference, now the features were clearly of a social-democratic nature (Sobottka, 2006). Some important proposals were defeated, such as the taxation of big fortunes, land reform and a solution for the problem of external and internal debt. But a large number of other demands were successful due to this engagement, including social policies, expanded citizenship rights, protection of indigenous peoples and remaining quilombo communities.

Several factors, however, such as a clear change in the zeitgeist, replacing social-democratic trends with neoliberal regimes in the West, the Roman Catholic hierarchy's increasingly tight control over liberation theology, and the simultaneous encouragement of charismatic renewal movements (see Portella and Carvalho, 2022), movements challenging involvement with politics in Protestant churches, the explosive growth of a market for religious services, and ethical problems in the political handling of administrations led by progressive parties (Vannucci and Petrarca, 2020) were major factors that contributed to the emptying of progressive political engagement of Christian institutions and individuals as Christians driven by their faith in recent decades.

This cooling coincided with a movement among Pentecostals and more conservative sectors of Protestantism that precisely encouraged greater cohesion in "evangelical" action in politics. In 1986, Josué Sylvestre, a member of the Assembly of God, coined the slogan that started this change: "Brother votes for brother" (Freston, 1992). It summarized a call that had already been made in 1985 in the *Mensageiro da Paz* newspaper to the effect that "we need the positioning of faithful believers in all sectors of secular life, including politics." The mission given to elected congresspersons was to carry out a *parliamentary apostolate*, in which the advocacy of agendas of customs occupies an important position.

This movement towards political participation was, as shown by Rodrigues and Fuks (2015), made easier by the hierarchical organization of churches that emerged in Pentecostalism. In neo-Pentecostal religious organizations, where hierarchy reaches the extreme level of personalization, the ability to disseminate political information and guide the electoral choice of the clientele was increased. In a few years, the presence of politicians who called themselves evangelicals multiplied,

to the point of forming an Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the National Congress (Trevisan, 2013). Currently the proportion of evangelical politicians with a progressive orientation is very small, while the Front as a whole has become one of the most active conservative political forces in Congress (Machado e Rocha et al., 2021).

The political growth of the so-called "*evangélicos*" – a public designation used in Brazil for Protestants, Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals taken together without distinction – also made their aspirations grow. Increasingly, places of worship and media outlets have become places for inducing voters towards "evangelical" candidates. What the Roman Catholic Church attempted in the 1930s with limited success (Peixoto, 2017) flourished in the "evangelical" camp to the point that political parties basically linked to this alliance emerged, echoing Edir Macedo, who already in 1990 expressed the desire to elect an evangelical as President of the Republic.

Even though in the Evangelical Parliamentary Front there is a small group of congresspersons committed to the project of a more democratic and socially just country, the actions of the vast majority of them are strongly focused on guaranteeing resources and privileges for religious organizations – if not for very personal purposes. Another front of action is the defense of very conservative customs as a reaction to changes in society and public policies, which have become more inclusive (Mariano, 2016). And perhaps this "customs agenda" – with its very diverse content – is a difficult area for parliamentarians and Christians committed to a democratic project, as in some topics there is an overlap of values and convictions.

With its intensive action at various levels of power, this wave of involvement of Christian and similar organizations with political power has made porous – and to a certain extent has undone – the tenuous separation between the exercise of citizenship by Christians as Christians, sometimes even with a prophetic voice, and the crude and Machiavellian practice of party politics inside and outside places of worship.

Expressions of reciprocal instrumentalization between "evangelicals" and politics?

The significant "evangelical" presence in Parliament, with explicit support from churches and religious organizations, managed to stop or reverse the guarantee of various citizenship rights. In the Federal Supreme Court (STF) there are now two "evangelical" Justices, something

considered a "leap for evangelicals."[10] In the words quoted above, they had won, at least temporarily, the right to "lead the nation" or determine who should preside over the government – which is no small feat. Their strategy so far has allowed them to largely direct the conservative movement in the country without having to take responsibility for the erosion of the management of institutions.

To understand this conservative avalanche among evangelicals, it is important to highlight three features of our culture that currently converge. Two of them are of a historical nature and well rooted in the Brazilian imagery, and the other is a result of recent developments. I'm referring first to the long tradition of messianisms, which began in Portuguese Sebastianism and which repeatedly resurface with promises of some kind of extraordinary intervention, to bring salvation to a people who have never been secularized, in a country that has never known a lay state (Queiroz, 1977; Della Cava, 1975). Another tradition, not very distant from the first one, is the authoritarian dimension in our cultural matrix, which never allowed the development of a clear notion of citizenship, of personal co-responsibility for the organization of public affairs, of equality before the law and a republican spirit.

A *third* tradition, of more recent origin, took hold as a vague perception of the possibility of clearly separating people into *good citizens* and others, generally *criminals*. The public discourse of this way of thinking became acceptable in Brazil basically after a referendum on greater or lesser control of firearms and ammunition, held in 2005. What prevailed as a result of it is the claim that the "good citizen" should have the right to possess weapons and use them to defend themselves. Distrust of the state's legitimate monopoly on the use of violence fueled a process that led to a division of the population into "good people" and their enemies – with the former having the right to defend themselves against the latter. Since then, the notion has grown that only the violence of those who consider themselves the best and strongest can offer some protection, renouncing a well-organized society and the prospect of pacifying social conflicts. A trait of our culture that is deeply *dehumanizing* has thus developed (Sobottka, 2017).

This conception of a dangerous enemy, which originally referred more or less vaguely to people who perpetrate physical violence, at a given moment was transferred to the political field.

[10] See "Mendonça no STF é 'filé-mignon' de evangélicos," *Folha de S. Paulo*, December 5, 2021, p. A15.

To a large extent based on anti-communist fantasies, resentment with policies of social inclusion, which reduced the gap between the poor and middle segments of the population, and economic insecurity, in addition to political errors and ethical failures of social-democratic governments, the entire progressive policy and, particularly, the Workers' Party and some of its leaders were ostensibly seen as the great enemies of the family, the country and even religion (Paiva et al., 2016; Fuks et al., 2021). This *resignification* is fundamental to understanding the hatred that has spread in the Brazilian political scene, particularly among segments of the radical political right wing.

The first and most fundamental step in such resignification processes is the creation of an enemy – and this creation gradually becomes *autonomous*, independent of concrete political content. Once established, it can migrate, be transferred and multiply. The political right-wing movement in Brazil took advantage of this and made the resignified image of a dangerous enemy proliferate among Christians, especially among segments more open to the diffuse tutelage by people who are seen as leaders[11].

Once having created the great enemy that threatens the family, the country and religion, the perception of the need for a radical and strong solution to the danger arises naturally. And it is precisely at this moment that, based on traits deeply rooted in Brazilian culture, messianism and authoritarianism could be activated. In an unfortunate coincidence, in 2018 the then candidate Jair Messias Bolsonaro suffered a political attack. He embodied some attributes that, despite being contradictory to each other, served as a significant reference for different social groups at that time. On the one hand, he stood out for decades as an advocate of military authoritarianism and the use of violence for personal ends. This attracted people with authoritarian inclinations of different stripes: people nostalgic for the military regime, defenders of the unrestricted use of weapons for personal defense, social groups fearful of losing their social status, among others. But that candidate is also called *Messias* [= Messiah], and he had carefully prepared his strategy of getting close to "evangelicals" with a practice of public religiosity. Even though he is Roman Catholic, he was baptized twice by neo-Pentecostal pastors in the Jordan River, in addition to appearing frequently

[11] Messages and videos circulating among evangelicals glorify weapons or simulate the execution of politicians. Their ideological leaders include, in addition to "faith businesspersons," congresspersons of the Parliamentary Public Security Front, also known as "bullet bench," and influencers such as can be seen in the Utah Project (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZXJsbOGVIQ).

and ostentatiously in worship services and celebrations, both in Pentecostal communities and neo-Pentecostal religious organizations.

These attributes allowed a transfer of the messianic expectation of savior of the country onto him. Conservative evangelicals and businesspeople from neo-Pentecostal religious organizations became fervent actors in the electoral campaign, presenting him as "God's chosen one" to govern Brazil. This transfer was so strong that, in addition to minimizing and tolerating destructive policies, large-scale corruption and genocidal policies during his administration, it induced a very significant majority of Christians to actively engage in the campaign for his reelection. Evangelical worship services became major political campaign stages: in addition to the candidate's speeches, pastors openly urged people to vote for him and prevent the enemy who would threaten the family and churches from coming to power. Even almost a year after his electoral defeat, he is still treated as "our President", as "sent from God" and "our hope;" there are several evangelical groups that hold vigil in his favor[12].

The neo-Pentecostal businesspeople, who added a very significant number of votes to the election and gave legitimacy to the government, had to content themselves with debt relief, tax exemptions and some important positions in the state structure. In general, there were basically only meager "gains" on the customs agenda, with the reinforcement of conservative policies. These meager results reveal that for this entire group of believers, and particularly for the most dedicated religious businesspeople, the opening for the penetration of political power in the sphere of worship services and faith experiences was above all a Pyrrhic victory. This reciprocal instrumentalization was unbalanced. They have sown division within Christian communities, as well as tolerance of and even the desire for violence and to taking justice into their own hands, for political reasons. They were, for millions of people, like wolves dressed in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). This is not the first time that leaders of churches and Christian communities have put themselves at the service of authoritarian and genocidal political projects. It is worrying to see that the ability to discern spirits and learn from mistakes – of others, from a historical perspective, or from one's own experience – is still a rare quality among Christians in Brazil.

[12] These expressions have been extracted from WhatsApp prayer groups in September 2023.

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