

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Political Conditions and Theological Foundations of the New Christian Right in Brazil

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Jair Messias Bolsonaro won the 2018 presidential elections in Brazil with the support of nearly 70% of the Evangelicals and around 50% of the Catholics in the country. This article aims at exploring some of the politically influential theologies disseminated by some of Bolsonaro's religious allies by constructing three theological typologies: Neoliberal supernaturalism, apocalyptic dualism and neoconservative Catholicism. These theological ideas gain relevance through an alliance between religious groups and the political right that based on the movement's key issues and cultural conditions is comparable to the Christian Right in the United States. The rise of Bolsonaro and the turn to the right in Brazilian politics can partly be understood as an effect legitimated by this new political alliance of three politically conservative Christian forces and their theologies: traditional Pentecostalism, neo-Pentecostalism and neoconservative Catholicism. Although there are authoritarian traits within what can be labelled Brazil's new Christian Right, this political phenomenon can also be said to contribute to Brazilian democracy.

Keywords: Brazilian religion; secularism, prosperity gospel; Catholic neoconservatism; Pentecostalism; political theology

Jair Messias Bolsonaro venceu as eleições presidenciais de 2018 no Brasil com o apoio de quase 70% dos evangélicos e cerca de 50% dos católicos do país. Este artigo tem como objetivo explorar algumas das teologias políticas e influentes que são disseminadas por alguns dos aliados religiosos de Bolsonaro, construindo três tipologias teológicas: Sobrenaturalismo neoliberal, dualismo apocalíptico e neoconservatismo católico. Sobrenaturalismo neoliberal, dualismo apocalíptico e neoconservatismo católico. Além disso, argumentamos que a Nova Direita Cristã no Brasil é comparável ao fenômeno "the Christian Right", típico dos Estados Unidos, devido às condições políticas e bandeiras morais semelhantes. A ascensão de Bolsonaro e a virada para a direita na política brasileira podem ser em parte entendidas como um efeito dessa nova aliança política legitimado de três forças cristãs politicamente conservadoras e suas teologias: o pentecostalismo tradicional, o neopentecostalismo e o catolicismo neoconservador. Embora haja traços autoritários dentro do que pode ser chamado a Nova Direita Cristã do Brasil, também se pode reconhecer esse fenômeno político como uma contribuição à democracia brasileira.

In her thorough documentation of the political role of Christian churches in recent electoral processes in Brazil, the political scientist Amy Erica Smith observes that evangelical clergy campaigning has proved relatively unsuccessful (Smith 2019:114). The primary cause of that has been the lack of coordination within the evangelical leadership. They have not chosen the same presidential candidate nor the same political party to endorse (2019:114). Smith's findings were based on a detailed analysis of the years before 2018, right before Brazil witnessed something new in the interaction between religion and politics. The election of Jair Bolsonaro on October 28, 2018 was the expression of what a unified Christian Right could achieve. The argu-

ably two most profiled evangelical leaders, Silas Malafaia from the Assemblies of God (AG) and Edir Macedo from the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), had for the first time backed one single candidate; the political rightist Bolsonaro. His victory was historical for being the most powerful expression of the energized Christian Right in Brazil. Moreover, the Evangelical front in the Congress, commonly known in Brazil as *a bancada evangélica*, had consolidated its power with 84 out of 513 deputies in the lower chamber of the Congress and was therefore larger as a block than any political party. Besides, 7 senators that belong to the block were elected (Almeida 2019:202). What are the political and theological foundations of this vibrant and forceful political ally of the new political right in Latin America's biggest economy? Can it be likened to the Christian Right in the United States and does its possible counterpart in Brazil pose a threat to democracy?

Political theology can be understood as embedded in the unstable and changing relation between political communities and religious orders or worldviews (de Vries 2006:25). To study theologies that are operative and influential in politics means, in other words, to pay particular attention to the specific ways political power is built and legitimated with recourse to notions of the divine. The debate about the potentially authoritarian and non-democratic traits of politicized religion is an old one (de Vries 2006; Gentile 2006). It has also been debated in the academic literature whether one should perceive Evangelicals' seeking of political power in Latin America through the mirror of the Christian Right movement in the United States (Freston 2013; Lehmann 2013; Levine 2012; Shah 2004). Both questions have with the rise of Bolsonaro gained new actuality in current research on religion and politics in Brazil (Almeida 2020; Burity 2020; Carranza 2020; Various 2019). Few works have, however, focused on the specifically theological nature of the discourse of Bolsonaro's religious allies.

The new political era in a shifting religious landscape

The inauguration of Jair Messias Bolsonaro as the president of Brazil on January 1, 2019 marked a new political epoch. During the ceremony in the the Brazilian Congress the newly elected president affirmed that he was on a mission (*missão*) to restore the Fatherland and to liberate it from corruption, crime, economical irresponsibility and what he called "ideological submission" (Bolsonaro 2019). Bolsonaro also proclaimed that "the ideology of gender" was hereafter to be combatted in a Brazil that was to be free from ideologies of any kind, in defense of the family and the Judeo-Christian tradition. The idea of an "ideology of gender" was not unique to Bolsonaro. The political outsider had appropriated the discourse divulged by Catholic priests as well as Protestant pastors in his country. Bolsonaro had not gained unison support from all Christian leaders as a considerable minority of them actively resisted his campaign for presidency. Nevertheless, Bolsonaro had invested rhetorically and strategically in a theological trope dear to many Christian Brazilians that voted against policies that they thought could undermine the Christian nuclear family, raise Brazilian schoolchildren into becoming homosexuals or make it illegal to declare homosexual practice a sin out of religious conviction and therefore limit religious freedom. In a country where legalization of abortion has been considered politically unlikely to be approved of by a majority of elected legislatives, pastors and politicians alike knew that a more decisive battle had to be fought in the political area of gender and sexuality. Thereby these topics were brought to the center of Brazil's culture war. Nonetheless, the government initiative from 2005 to revise the abortion laws of the criminal code served together with government proposals such as the program "Brasil sem Homofobia" as occasions for the religious conservatives to mobilize congregants to take part in political activities, in meetings, campaigns and marches (Machado 2012).

Originally a more diverse group these reactionary religious forces have over the years coordinated their work to strengthen their influence, as manifested in the

Evangelical block in Congress (*A Bancada Evangelica*). An interesting example is the Evangelical dissident view on abortion that the founder and bishop of the neo-Pentecostal UCKG holds. While Edir Macedo has called for a pro-choice abortion policy, his followers hold like the rest of the Brazilian population a restrictive pro-life point of view.¹ Probably out of political calculation UCKGs political candidates consistently leave their leader's view behind and campaign with a pro-life stance (Smith 2019:67). With policies that could appeal to the wider Pentecostal and Evangelical milieus, even to Catholics, they have contributed to a more unified Christian front that has pitted supposedly religious principles against secular ideologies.

In his inauguration speech Bolsonaro also promised that his government would be "maculating the political class" and put Brazil first (*Brasil acima de tudo!*). His "mission" could be carried out by Bolsonaro thanks to divine intervention, since his life was spared through "a miracle" in the hospital.

The contrast between the inauguration of Bolsonaro's presidential period to the era that was initiated with the swearing-in of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as the country's new president on January 1, 2003 was striking (da Silva 2003). Lula also thanked God, but not for having miraculously saved his life. The leftist expressed gratitude to God for having brought him to the position as "the primary public servant" of Brazil. While Lula invoked God two times in his inaugural speech, Bolsonaro mentioned the deity six times in a considerably shorter discourse. While Bolsonaro would do away with the political class, Lula promised to end hunger. And in contrast to Bolsonaro, Lula did not promise to eradicate ideologies, but to make the eradication of hunger into a cause for every Brazilian, regardless of her or his ideology, as if recognized and even valued political diversity. Notably, Lula imagined Brazil as a pluralist and diverse nation, with a special place for indigenous and black communities. In short, Lula's talk was a ceremonial speech that was less overtly religious, with a liberal emphasis on cultural diversity. It was not radically secularist. God was after all presented as part of the basis for Lula's mandate as the leader of the nation.

Nevertheless, after assuming office as the Foreign minister Ernesto Araújo declared in his "Letter from Brasilia" that "cultural Marxism" had been defeated with Bolsonaro's victory and proclaimed: "The last barrier has been broken: we can now talk about God in public. Who could imagine?" (Araújo 2019). The member of Bolsonaro's cabinet argued as if there had been no room for God-talk in Brazilian politics due to the Worker's Party's and the elite's "thought control". In other words, he celebrated a defeat over an imagined leftist secularist intolerance. In his celebratory discourse of the new civic room liberated from the left's secularist censorship the minister did not mention that the separation of church and state in Brazil has since the First Republic's 1891 constitution been enforced without the exclusion of religion from political life. Furthermore, Brazilian secularism has unlike the case of Mexico or Uruguay never resulted in a radical anticlerical movement (Mariano 2011).

With the declared religious freedom of the Republic of 1891 Protestants immigrants could establish Lutheran,

Presbyterian, Baptist and Congregational churches. They maintained a low profile and Protestants have only with Pentecostals' strategy of religious partisanship ("brother votes for brother") after the return of democracy in 1985 gained considerable political influence in the form of a few seats in the Congress (Mariano and Oro 2017). In recent decades, however, Evangelical electoral mobilization has resulted in a rising number of elected politicians in pair with the overall growth of the Evangelical population. The election of the Pentecostal Eduardo Cunha as speaker of the Chamber of Deputies in 2015 as well as the election of the UCKG bishop Marcelo Crivella as mayor in the 2016 municipal elections of Rio de Janeiro constitute political milestones for Evangelical Politics in Brazil (Lacerda 2018). Moreover, in April that same year politicians from the Evangelical Front as one of the most powerful voting blocs in the Congress became notorious for defending their vote for the impeachment of the leftist president Dilma Rousseff with proclamations such as "for God" and "for the Evangelicals" (Martín 2016).

The term "Evangelical" is used in this article to denote the social segments of Brazilians who refer to themselves as such. It encompasses the charismatic Christians in the mainline denominations, the historical Protestants that arrived in the nineteenth century. It refers primarily, however, to the loosely defined group of Pentecostals, from the originally classic sort of the AG to the neo-Pentecostal one represented by UCKG.² Charismatic evangelicalism is currently the dominant trend of global Protestantism and Brazil is one of its global epicenters. It has been on a steady rise all over Latin America for the last decades, but it has not translated itself into political representation in every national context in the region. In Brazil it has a greater representation than other religious minorities, for instance Afro-Brazilian religions. If these churches had not developed the strategy of actively supporting candidates from their own congregations their adherents would probably have been underrepresented in Brazilian legislatures.

As evidenced in his inaugural discourse, Bolsonaro invested heavily in the idea of the threat of the foreign and alienating "ideology of gender" posed to the Brazilian nation. He most likely earned considerably from it. According to the Brazilian polling institute Datafolha, Evangelicals made up 31% of the electorate, reflecting a fast growth from the 22% counted in the 2010 Census (Schmidt and Engler 2017). Nearly 70% of them reported that they intended to vote for Bolsonaro in the second and decisive round, while roughly half of the Catholics said the same (Datafolha 2018). Half of the Catholics declared support for the leftist Fernando Haddad. This is indicative of a deeper political division among Catholics as well as a persistent legacy of a Catholic left in Brazil. Founded by groups that were oppositional to the military regime (1964–1985) at the time when the Catholic church figured as the central institution of resistance to the non-democratic regime, the Worker's Party has since its inception in 1980 been populated by Catholic activists. The social ties between the Catholic base communities and the party were particularly strong in the 1980s when PT partisans to a large degree received their political education from

ecclesial milieu inspired by liberation theology. Leftist activists from unions and church organizations were the primary social base for the party in 1990 (Follmann 2000). The Worker's Party gained governmental power in 2003 and formed a coalition that included even a right-wing party. Many left-oriented activists withdrew from the party, particularly after the first major corruption scandal (*Mensalão*) in 2004–05 which implicated the party (Mainwaring 2018). It was gradually bereft of its former social base in leftist social movements, including branches of the base communities. Nonetheless, Lula became a remarkably popular president and was reelected in 2006 with considerable support from Evangelical voters. Evangelical voters were quicker to withdraw their support for the Worker's Party than were Catholics and adherents of other religions or no-religion (Smith 2019:19), but they still constituted a considerable share of the electorate that voted for Lula's second term and for his successor as the Worker's Party's presidential candidate, Dilma Rousseff, in 2010 and 2014. Although the Evangelical population was less supportive, the ones who said they would vote for Rousseff was still in majority within this religious group. Had Lula been allowed to pose as presidential candidate in 2018 polls indicated that he could have won, also with significant vote from Evangelical Christians, perhaps even backed by the Evangelical institution with the arguably most effective electoral machine; the UCKG. While the UCKG church openly campaigned against Lula in the 1989 elections and implicitly demonized him in 1994 (Corten 1996:108; Freston 2001:30), they favored him and the Worker Party's presidential candidates from 2002 onwards. They appear to go with the victorious candidate and just eight days before the primary round in 2018 their bishop Edir Macedo openly declared his support for Bolsonaro (Balloussier, 2018b). It begs the question of whether theology has any significant weight in the neo-Pentecostal church or if strategic interests projected at maximizing electoral outcome for its own politicians and the wider political influence determine the most.

When considering Bolsonaro's immense support by Evangelical voters it is fundamental to understand that if Lula had not been imprisoned it would have introduced an entirely different political logic to the electoral process in 2018 with a higher number of Evangelical voters than ever before in the history of Brazil. In other words, the candidate that capitalizes on pastors' theological core issues, such as gender and sexuality, is not necessarily the one that is secured the victory. There are other factors, also more decisive factors than religion, even in a religiously vibrant democracy as Brazil where nearly half of the population reports attending a religious service at least once a week (Pew 2014). Churches are, in other words, some of the most central arenas for socialization among Brazilian citizens and the kind of political theology they are exposed to is potentially influential for the outcome of elections. Considering that Brazilians report having minimal trust in political parties and consider the Catholic church as the most trustworthy, only superseded by the Armed Forces (Paz 2018), means that Christian religion persists as a source of moral capital and also of political legitimacy.

The Brazilian Christian Right – parallels and conditions

The Brazilian sociologist Paul Freston warned in a publication from 2013 against seeing third-world Pentecostalism “through the lens of the American religious right”, and thus reducing global Pentecostalism to “an extension of American soft power”. He referred to data from 2006 that demonstrated how Latin American Pentecostals’ support for the US war on terror and Christian Zionism or support for the policies of the state of Israel were lower than among North American Pentecostals, as if this showed that culture wars in the US were not reproduced in Latin America (Freston 2013). David Lehmann concurred with Freston’s view (Lehmann 2013).

The argument here for a sustained parallel between the Christian Right in the US and in Brazil is not to claim a simple reproduction of the North American cultural wars in Latin America. It is rather to point to likeness in certain aspects without reducing the unique dimensions to the Brazilian cultural dynamics to a reflex of events happening elsewhere. We can make sense of the Brazilian case through some degree of comparison while taking seriously the idea that multiple theologies and practices of Christianity are being diffused globally and at the same time adapted to local contexts. Moreover, since Freston’s publication in 2013 a considerable shift to the right has taken place among Brazilian Evangelical voters. The Pentecostal voters Freston pointed to for their low support to Christian Zionism have chosen a president who has nearly reversed Brazil’s foreign policy vis-à-vis the Palestinians, claiming that “Palestine is not a country, so there should be no embassy here” (BBC, 2018). In light of recent political shifts in Brazilian politics, Freston’s warning appears to have lost some argumentative force since its publication.

Similar to the political dynamic in the US, the churches’ proliferation of the competing worldviews that drive the culture wars fixed on topics such as family, reproductive health and sexuality either make political divisions more visible or create political polarization. Since the Worker’s Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*) in 2004 launched human rights initiatives such as the program “Brasil without Homophobia” various religious groups have reacted in ways that signal that they consider the worldview of the political opponent as mutually incompatible with their own. Thereof the aptness of the term “cultural war” (Smith 2019:4). A landmark decision that confirmed the existence of an immoral order bereft of Christian values represented by the decisions made by the Worker’s Party-led state was the legalization of same-sex marriage manifested in high court decisions in 2011 and 2013. From a religious point of view this decision could test the religious conservatives’ trust in democracy, that is their tolerance of an order that legally make room for practices considered sinful according to their faith. It creates conditions for suspicion vis-à-vis the state, but there is an open question of whether this suspicion furnishes policy views that calls for a minimal state or to conquer the state in order to Christianize it, regardless of its size. The result, however, could all the same lead to neoliberal policies

and to shrinking of the public sector (cuts in the program *Bolsa Familia* etc), since the issues of Brazil’s culture war are in sum one of the motors in the electoral movement toward the political right.

Associations that the term “Christian Right” give to the well-known political activism of various Christian groups in the United States from the late 1970s help to indicate some characteristics of its Brazilian counterpart. First, similar to the US case the Brazilian phenomenon emerged out of primarily Protestant Evangelical groups that in the typical struggles against liberalizing of laws on abortion and against the state’s legal recognition of gay marriage have strategic interests with certain Catholic groups, in spite of religious rivalry and ideological differences on other matters central to their particular confession. Catholic conservatism surely predates reactionary Evangelicalism, but can be renewed by it. This political mobilization is to a high degree perceived by these activists and groups as a battle against a non-religious worldview incompatible with their own. It invests rhetorically and politically in the imagined opposition between religion and secularity. Second, like in the US, this culture war contributes to social and political polarization that originates in these groups’ fixations on policy domains that are not intrinsically bound to other political topics such as ecology, market economy or economic redistribution. The Christian groups’ mobilization around a limited number of issues, sometimes making citizens into one-issue-voters (Millies 2018), effectively move groups of religiously motivated voters toward the political right. Third, these Brazilian groups can also be rightly considered the parallel to or duplicate of the Christian Right in the US based on comparable political conditions in the moment these religious actors attempt to gain political influence, even dominance.

Both in the US as well as in Brazil these groups thrive in political climates conditioned by passive secularist states, that are constitutionally bounded by the principle of disestablishment and therefore do not officially privilege one particular confession. Illustratively, Catholic education is legally prohibited in Brazilian public schools.³ Officially, these states withdraw from a political sphere that must be filled or conquered by religion if politics is to be explicitly anchored in and legitimated with religion. The Brazilian as well as the US federal state can be defended as examples of passive secularism (Kuru, 2007). The low barriers for agents who want to enter these countries’ relatively unregulated religious economy, combined with some restrictions on the religious groups’ ability to campaign for political parties and candidates, account for this. Amy Erica Smith perceives the legal regulations against certain forms of church-run electoral campaigns as analogous to the 1954 Johnson amendment that forbids tax-exempted non-profit organizations as for instance churches to campaign on behalf of politicians or parties (Smith 2019:86). The passive aspect to the states’ secularism could be exemplified by the hesitance to prosecute religious leaders that use their institutions to openly endorse candidates.

While the secularist state model in the two countries are imposing similar conditions for the Christian Right, the party system in which these two strands or movements are

seeking influence is very different. Meanwhile electoral competition in the US has taken place within one of the most rigid two-party systems in world (Taylor 2017:722), the democratic struggle for political positions in Brazil occurs on the basis of a highly fragmented system with 30 parties represented in the Lower House of the Congress. Interestingly, increasing political representation of minority Evangelical segments of the population has developed alongside this combination of partial fragmentation and simultaneous institutionalization of the party system. Unlike countries in Latin America where party systems have suffered from desinstitutionalization or collapse, in Brazil this system has become increasingly institutionalized and electoral competition has been more stable from 1994 until 2014 (Mainwaring 2018:195–96), partly thanks to the Worker Party's success under Lula (2018:190).

Although some Evangelical politicians found their way into positions in some of the major parties, such as the Pentecostal Benedita da Silva who served in office as federal deputy for the Worker's Party as early as 1986,⁴ a disproportionately high number of deputies in the Evangelical Front have represented smaller parties from high-magnitude districts, such as São Paulo. This probably reflects a strategy of maximizing Evangelical electoral power based on calculation and historical experience (Reich and dos Santos 2013). To be Evangelical does not bring electoral benefit to a candidate compared to a non-Evangelical one, although being so is what makes it possible for Evangelical candidates to win seats that they would not have resources to campaign for without the sponsoring of churches and their infrastructure (radio stations, TV channels, churches as political arenas) (Lacerda 2018:32). Since these Evangelical politicians have also tended to switch party more often than non-religious deputies they have contributed less to the mentioned institutionalization of the party system.

The negative effect on the vote for posing as an Evangelical candidate, however, points to some of the limitations of the political influence of the theologies behind the strengthened Christian Right in Brazil. Theological ideas matter. All the same, their power over the hearts and minds of Brazilian voters are limited by a range of factors since the electorate and its deputies do not merely comply with what their religious leaders tell them to do. There is no simple trickle-down effect of theological ideas on political realities. The calculation of 20 percent fidelity that UCKG officials have projected is indicative of the unlikeliness of such a vertical effect on adherents to Christian churches. Besides, this is arguably the most effective church in terms of mobilizing their adherents to vote for specific candidates (Smith 2019:122).

Even the most religiously committed in terms of attendance to Christian meetings, that potentially can be filled with political discourses, are influenced by a lot of other persuasive forces in the society in times of elections. And not all church leaders endorse specific candidates. They often limit themselves to general statements about choosing a candidate that do God's will or they limit their preaching to topics such as abortion, gender or caring for the poor. Moreover, in order to safeguard their corporate

interests a church like UCKG may exclusively focus on legislative elections (2019:118), leaving the question of who should be the president up to its adherents to decide. In other words, to measure the exact theological effect on the ballot box is an arduous, if not to say, an impossible task. There are nonetheless certain theologies that have proven to be particularly useful for the Christian Right in Brazil, and which therefore exert considerable influence over the politics in the country, powerfully manifested in the election of Bolsonaro as well as the electoral success of Evangelical Front in the Congress. First, there is what can be detected as a neoliberal supernaturalism in the case of neo-Pentecostalism. Second, there is an apocalyptic dualism evidenced in distinguishable and more traditional forms of politically committed Pentecostals. Third, neo-conservative expressions of Catholicism have gained more terrain in the recent decade in Brazil, not least through its theologically grounded hostility to political leftism.

Without assuming that the three are isolated cases that exist in pure forms, these theologies can be discerned as typologies that can be hypothesized here without neglecting that the theologies operative in the preaching and practices of the churches in Brazil have multiple forms that attest to the immense diversity of Christianity in the country and also in the wider region of Latin America. While for instance prosperity theology is one of the major objects of disagreement among the clergy in various Christian denominations in Brazil (2019:65), its diffusion cannot be strictly limited to neo-Pentecostalism.

Neoliberal supernaturalism: Neo-pentecostalism

Millions of Brazilians adheres to the various neo-Pentecostal churches of which the UCKG is arguably the most visible and also powerful, not least to its ownership of the Rede Record TV Network purchased in 1990 (the first TV station to interview Bolsonaro after his electoral victory) (Birman and Lehmann 1999). Its founder from the 1970s, Edir Macedo, still leads the church. Although Macedo endorsed Bolsonaro's candidacy a few days ahead of election in 2018, the influence of the UCKG theology is of a more indirect kind; the church makes voters receptive to the political right through the worldview that it disseminates through its adaption of North American prosperity theology. In the 1940s and 1950s Pentecostal evangelists began to explain to its followers how wealth, capitalism and devotion to the Christian God were interrelated (Bowler 2013). Through surrender and trust in God the believer could achieve divine blessing in material forms of wealth and health here and now on earth (Garrard-Burnett 2013). Modern capitalism became thereby the self-given framework in which the divine operates and prosperity gospel alleviated the believer from any suspicion that the economic system itself was contrary to the divine will and order in this world. In this theological vision of the world, economic success from entrepreneurial business is far from a morally problematic result of economic exploitation. It is a manifestation of the believers' exemplary trust in God. The benefits from the market economy are not totally transparent for human rationality, since supernatural forces operate within it. The intellect that hinders the

human being from acknowledging these divine blessings received through the financial sphere has to be sacrificed in order to attain a real and active Christian faith, according to Edir Macedo. Otherwise we become subject to the forces of the devil in the spiritual warfare in this world.

In the UCKG this naturalization of the divine blessings of the free market is coupled with a ritual innovation that taps into pre-institutional forms of religion found in heterogeneous forms of popular Catholicism (Løland, 2015). Through prayer as well as the proper ritualistic use of religious objects miraculous prosperity can be attained immediately. There is no need for long term social planning or political analysis, since everything is possible for the individual that have faith in God here and now.

Among the proper religious practices is sacrifice in the form of money, an object which is heavily invested in as a mean of divine prosperity. If you have a true faith you will get what you pay through miraculous benefits. This theological logic makes redistributive solidarity superfluous since there is no scarcity of resources in this universe of prosperity theology. Moreover, it provides a theodicy of suffering within this world that effectively leaves analyses of complex social, economic and political processes irrelevant. They are not complex at all, in Macedo's theological vision:

It is impossible for the offering person not to have spiritual and financial return when the offering is according to the will of God. I believe that the Christians in their majority live a life on the border of poverty and misery because their offerings have demonstrated the lack of love, fear and respect for God. (Macedo quoted in Stålsett 2006:205)

In this way, the misery of the poorest Brazilians is presented as a direct consequence of the lack of true belief. It is necessary to offer money to the church, not least since it constitutes an article of faith for this church (Garrard-Burnett 2013:29). In sum, true belief becomes attainable through the buying of salvific goods in the church that are intimately connected to late modern capitalist virtues of consumerism and individualism (Mora, 2008).

The supernatural forces that are dramatized in the staged healing and exorcism in the neo-Pentecostal services enchant the disenchanting rationality of market economy. Moreover, this enchantment is also enacted in the theological vision of politics where the very same forces are supposed to be acting in a direct sense of the word. The devil himself may be present in the National Congress or some politicians may be possessed by demonic spirits, according to sermons in the church (Oro, 2003). This spiritualization of the political also contributes to the displacement of non-religious explanations of social ills. As bishop Guaracy Santos wrote roughly two weeks before Bolsonaro's victory, why are there so many corrupt politicians and so much extreme poverty? "The problem is entirely spiritual" (*O problema é totalmente espiritual*), the religious leader of UCKG assured (Santos, 2018). So where does then the alliance with more conservative Pentecostals, rivals in the religious market, come from?

An amoral rationality is inherent to neoliberalism at the level of both ends and means. This does not make it incompatible with neo-Pentecostal prosperity theology, since the theological logic with its circuits of interchange between supernatural forces and the natural sphere of the human being is not bound by a specific moral. This is an elastic theological logic that allows the neo-Pentecostal bishop or pastor to sanction or not sanction a certain moral behavior of the beneficiary believer of the prosperity. The mentioned liberal view on abortion held by bishop Macedo is an indication of the larger rupture of neo-Pentecostalism with the moral conservatism of more traditional Pentecostalism that have deeper roots in the classical forms in its early period in Brazil. It stands side by side with Macedo's polemic against what he considered to be the "kit gay policy" of Fernando Haddad (Macedo, 2012).

With strategic interests in the governments led by the Worker's Party from 2003–2016, UCKG has not stood at the forefront of the culture war in recent decades. One indication of this is the relatively low political profile of Edir Macedo's blog and Twitter account. But this strategy has also theological roots in the liberalization of behavioral norms (Mariano, 1999). Rather than being the primary catalyst for the culture war of the Christian right this neo-Pentecostal church justifies and naturalizes the overlapping of moral conservatism with neoliberalism that at the outset are two distinct rationalities (Brown, 2006). In sum, neoliberal supernaturalism is predisposed to serve the tacit support of the Christian right to the liberalization of the market economy, bypassing questions of economic redistribution and workers' rights. The invisible hand of the market is no other than God's hand.

Apocalyptic dualism: Traditional Pentecostalism

In tension but also in a certain overlap to neoliberal supernaturalism is what can be termed "apocalyptic dualism". While the prosperity gospel serves as an undercurrent of official political discourse, there is an equally dualistic spiritualization of politics in Brazilian Pentecostalism that is explicit and unreserved in its endorsements of political candidates. While neo-Pentecostalism typically preaches that divine prosperity is attainable with sufficient faith in the present, some of the more traditional forms of Pentecostalism are more directed toward future expectations and celestial realities. The AG is an example of this traditional Pentecostalism and this is the affiliation of churches that gathers the highest number of Pentecostals in Brazil. Some of these more apocalyptically oriented believers are expecting a decisive shift of earthly matters in the expectation of Jesus' second coming and this temporary dimension of apocalypticism often leads to theological interpretations of human history. Amy Erica Smith quotes an example of an application of this apocalyptic perspective to Brazilian politics in a sermon of an AG pastor:

Brazil always followed the US in fighting communism ... We don't accept totalitarianism or totalitarian parties. Here in Brazil we had the Revolution of 1964 [this is the military regime's term for its 1964

coup]. Those who fought the revolution were affiliated with the PT, the Communist Party, the Communist Party of Brazil. Those parties might change their name, but they stay the same. They don't believe in God, they don't fight violence, they don't support legislation that supports families. But none of this surprises me ... These things are signs that Jesus is returning. That's why I don't preach against the PT. I know that it's the will of God that it happens (Smith 2019:84–5).

This is an interesting case of how the apocalyptic logic leads the pastor to a political passivity, apparently. He implicitly demonizes the Worker's Party, treating them as signs of the end time that as expressions of evil serve as instruments for God's action. They are simply atheists that do not support families. The political realities are presented by the pastor in stark dualist terms typical of the apocalyptic genre found in several books of the New Testament. Apocalyptic texts often present the state of things as representing evil and admonishes the reader to avoid any compromise with this evil age and its figures. The logic, however, carries within it an inherent hostility to the major leftist party, based on certain moral values that are privileged and seen as essential to God's will. One of them is "legislation that support families".

This theologically grounded hostility to the Worker's Party is seen in the politically perhaps most influential Pentecostal pastor in Brazil, Silas Malafaia. Malafaia leads the AG congregation in Rio de Janeiro "Vitória em Cristo" and is intensely engaged in politicking on a day-to-day basis through his Twitter account. It has 1,4 million followers, which is more than three times more than Edir Macedo's.

Similar to the neo-Pentecostal discourse, Malafaia sees the spiritual warfare taking place within Brazilian politics. Unlike the tendency in the UCKG church, however, Malafaia does not refrain from applying the theological metaphors that describe this spiritual warfare on a general level directly to more specific political realities. During the 2018 campaign Malafaia explicitly endorsed Bolsonaro as the candidate true Evangelicals should vote for. This followed a pattern in Malafaia's public activity. In 2010 he had openly endorsed Dilma Rousseff's main oppositor José Serra and in 2014 he supported the AG convert Marina Silva, albeit after she withdrew her program of support for gay-marriage and criminalization of homophobia. Malafaia legitimates his political partisanship in the presidential elections in a stark cosmological dualism between good and evil, God and the devil. On Evangelical radio stations in Rio de Janeiro one could hear the Pentecostal pastor interrogate the listener with an option filled with theological density: "Do you have Christ's mentality or are you going to vote for the people who play with the devil?" (*Você tem a mente de Cristo o vai votar nessa gente que faz o jogo de satanás?*) With these words Malafaia confronted the listeners of one of the most popular radio stations in Rio de Janeiro (Pacheco, 2018). Those who had followed Malafaia's politicking for some time were not left with any doubt about who the

people were that "played with the devil". After all, many could recall Malafaia's explicit demonization of the governing president and party when they sought reelection in 2014. Following Rousseff's victory in the first round Malafaia affirmed that "the devil invented the lie, Dilma and the Worker's Party perfected it" (*O diabo inventou a mentira, Dilma e o PT aperfeiçoaram*).⁵

Fundamental to the genre of apocalypticism is the idea that the message of a radical overturning is revealed to a person or group elected by God. Interestingly, the first time Bolsonaro appeared in public after his electoral victory was secured he came to Malafaia's church. Bolsonaro seemingly confessed that he was not the most capable, but affirmed that God empowers the elected ("*Tenho certeza de que não sou o mais capacitado, mas Deus capacita os escolhidos*"). In that way he indirectly referred to himself as elected, which is a powerful theological idea, particularly in Pentecostal theology that builds on charismatic rather than institutional authority. Malafaia elaborated on Bolsonaro's idea of divine election at the event and bolstered it with a recitation of 1 Corinthians 1:27–29 and Paul's theology of election, that "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27b). Then Malafaia went further, stating that "this is the reason why God chose you", pointing with his finger at Bolsonaro.⁶ Bolsonaro had not only been chosen by a majority of Brazilians. In Malafaia's vision he was also chosen by God.

One of the major reasons for why Malafaia should conceive of Bolsonaro as preferred by God himself is the very reason why he only conditionally would endorse an Evangelical candidate for presidency (Marina Silva) in 2014: The moral conservatism that characterizes more classically inspired Pentecostalism, primarily centered around the question of homosexuality, in the words of Pentecostal pastors like Malafaia, "the ideology of gender". Since this is an ideology that threatens the God-given order of man and woman as foundation of the family, Brazil must be rescued from it. Hence, a kind of Christian salvation is at stake in the issue and salvation is the major event in the cosmological drama that is interpreted in so diverse ways in different Christian theologies, construed in multiple contexts. And this is where neoconservative Catholicism comes in.

The theological justification of anti-petismo: Neoconservative Catholicism

According to Pew Research Center the most frequent reason US Evangelicals reported having for their support to Donald Trump was that "he is not Hillary Clinton". The electoral base of the Christian Right was driven to support for Trump not least because of their opposition to his political opponent. A fundamental aspect to the Brazilian counterpart of the North American Christian Right is a prevailing discourse of opposition to *o Partido dos Trabalhadores*, the PT, giving rise to the term *petismo*. For decades PT has functioned as an anchor for the political left. Although it has moved further to the political center while governing, its initiatives resulted in a historical expansion of LGBT rights. These policies led to reactionary mobilizations from the Christian right, as seen in the case of

Malafaia's Pentecostalism. But the Christian mobilizations against political leftism has by no means been limited to Charismatic Evangelicalism.

The official stance of the Catholic church in the 2018 elections were nonpartisan and the pronouncements of the president of the bishops' conference (CNBB), cardinal Sergio da Rocha, were restricted to general admonitions advising the Catholic voter to support candidates that were in favor of democracy. The Catholic Bolsonaro, that had been baptized in the Jordan river by a Pentecostal pastor and frequented a Baptist church, on his part attacked the CNBB as "the rotten part of the Church" (Conti, 2018). On his Twitter account, however, Bolsonaro had in 2017 praised the youtube channel of the Catholic priest Paulo Ricardo. Ricardo is no formal authority in the Catholic church, but backed by the TV network linked to the Catholic Charismatic Renewal Ricardo has gained publicity through the use of various media (Silveira, 2018). He has more than 1,4 million followers on Facebook and offers online courses through his web site. Its content signals an affinity with the discourse of the essayist Olavo de Carvalho, particularly in its use of the category of "cultural Marxism".

After Bolsonaro was stabbed at a campaign rally in September 2018, Ricardo held a sermon that was diffused through social media where he spoke of moral persecution and alluded to the stabbing of Bolsonaro (Balloussier, 2018a). In contrast to Malafaia, Ricardo has refused to openly endorse any political candidate. When maintaining his non-partisan stance, he refers to the authority of former Pope Benedict XVI instead of the current pope, a pattern in his interpretative politics. Ricardo forms part of the clergy Amy Erica Smith found that strongly opposed PT but who not always were passionate supporters of opposition candidates (2019:85).

Nonetheless, Padre Paulo Ricardo is a clear and powerful example of the Catholic component of the culture war. He is an influential priest that propagates a worldview he considers to be the true Catholic one and incompatible with the one he denounces as the "cultural Marxism" of the Brazilian left. He typically presents his adversary on the left in stark oppositional terms. Meanwhile his Catholicism disseminates truth, the leftist revolutionary does not even believe in the existence of truth, according to Ricardo. Furthermore, cultural Marxism is a global phenomenon that has set out to destroy the traditional family, since the days when Engels saw the family as the origin of social inequalities. For Ricardo there is an ideological genealogy that begins with Marx and Engels and leads up to United Nations and NGOs today, hence it is a global threat to the Christian family life of Brazilian believers. Cultural Marxism is a force through political initiatives from the Worker's Party but it has also entered the Catholic church through liberation theology, resulting from a Marxist strategy. Since Marxism did not succeed in eradicating religion through the Russian Revolution, the Gulags and the Spanish Civil War it employed a new tactic: To infiltrate the Church with the purpose of destroying it from within. With the image of Leonardo Boff at his website Ricardo affirms that liberation theology negates transcendence,

a criticism that resembles the Vatican's criticism of liberation theology formulated by cardinal Ratzinger in the 1980s for the Congregation of the Doctrine of faith, which might be one of Ricardo's authoritative sources. In this way, the religious adversary in Ricardo's culture war is both within and outside the Catholic church.

His theology is free of the prosperity gospel and markedly less apocalyptic when he construes a vision of human history selectively in which progressive claims by sexual minorities become expressions of a cultural Marxism that aims at destroying Christianity altogether. Accordingly, there can be no compromises with these destructive cultural forces with global ramifications. He shares the moral concerns of Pentecostal conservatism and has advocated for a strategic alliance with them. In a less directly political and notably more intellectual tone Ricardo has become a major symbol of a Catholic neoconservatism that is only shared by a minority of the bishops, like bishop Dom Orani Tempesta. All the same, when Ricardo fiercely attacks the Brazilian left for its attempts of dismantling the traditional family through new plans of sexual education in primary schools, he can draw on the official Catholic discourse that warns against the so-called "ideology of gender". Arguably, the first ecclesial document in Latin America from the Catholic church that employed the expression was a 1998 document from the bishops' conference in Peru (Coelho & Santos, 2016). The term was recognized as valid for Catholic theology at the Latin American bishops' conference in Aparecida in 2007 and the warning against the ideology was reiterated in Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation "Amoris Laetitia" (§ 56) from 2016. The theological denouncement of it is common in Latin America, among Protestants as well as Catholics.

The Christian Right: Authoritarian or democratic?

The Christian right in Brazil have mobilized against accelerating progressive policies, particularly when it comes to the legal rights of sexual minorities. In terms of regaining electoral power, they have enjoyed huge victories, recently culminating in the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro. Moreover, while the Christian right in the US for decades have fought to overthrow the Roe vs. Wade decision, the Brazilian counterpart can comfortably rely on the restrictive status quo in the legislation of abortion. This constitutes a major difference. Nonetheless, the parallels are there.

New authorities have arisen in Brazil's changing religious landscape. Silas Malafaia and padre Paulo Ricardo can be considered as charismatic figures with a political influence that has partly been made possible through cyberactivism. Moreover, it is not the formal leadership of the Catholic church that has mobilized voters to elect rightist politicians in recent elections. Far from it, the Catholic bishops are perceived by many on the right as a political threat in questions such as ecology, workers' rights and the legacy of the left.

On one hand, the Christian right can be regarded as a contribution to democracy. Rather than some kind of religious vote-rigging or brain control, religious activism fosters mobilization, polemics and discussions on various

levels in the society. The fact that a religious minority like Pentecostals has not been underrepresented in the Congress is an achievement of Brazilian democracy. Smith found that clergy is more supportive of representative democracy than their congregants (2019:172). For Brazilian democracy, the decreasing support for it among common people is worrying. In the light of the prominent role of religion within Brazilian politics, however, the steady belief in democracy among religious leaders is a healthy sign. Moreover, the infrastructure of these fast-growing Christian communities has enabled a social mobility of segments of the society that otherwise would have few chances in an electoral system where running for office has high economic costs. While the Catholic left in the 1970s and 1980s proved itself to be major force for democracy in its resistance to the military regime and through fostering a new civic culture for the Brazilian democracy, the Christian right in the 2000s constitutes a political phenomenon of democracy.

On the other hand, the authoritarian traits of some of the theologies that operate on the Christian right should be noted. Apocalyptic reasoning or demonization may foster political mobilizations, but not deliberative discussions in democracy. Far from it, the demonization of political opponents of the Christian right goes hand in hand with a cyberactivism that spreads misinformation and hatred rather than enlightening political deliberations. As noted by Martin Lindhardt, organizational and rhetorical skills acquired in Pentecostal practices in Latin America are not automatically translated into democratic cultures and political dialogue in the region (Lindhardt, 2013). There are authoritarian potentials of Christianity that have been actualized through this religious force on the political right and they have effectively backed a candidate that has defended human rights violations of the military regime (1964–1985). Moreover, the policies carried forward in the name of the ideology of gender may be said to lead to continuous devaluations of political liberty in the field of reproductive rights. At the very least, the Christian right's valorization of state power for particular moral ends stands in potential tension with the liberal culture of constitutional democracy. But given the pervasive force of religion in Brazil, the religiously committed may in fact be the key for preserving liberal democracy. In the words of Amy Erica Smith:

Secular norms lead citizens partially to resist clergy influence and political activism, and they boost the legitimacy of democracy and the political system. If ideological, electoral, and social conflict are the symptoms of Brazilian culture wars, secular norms – even, or especially, the secular norms of highly religious citizens – are the potential cure (2019:145).

Notes

- ¹ In a poll undertaken by Pew Research Center in 2006 no less than 79% agreed with the view that abortion is never justifiable. (Machado, 2012, p. 37)
- ² In agreement with the typologies of Ricardo Mariano (Mariano, 1999).

³ Confessional religious instruction is commonly considered as illegal, although the 2009 concordat with the Vatican contains certain ambiguities with regard to the issue. (Cunha, 2009)

⁴ Benedita da Silva has a non-typical political trajectory as a Pentecostal politician in Brazil. (Corten, 1996, pp. 241–252)

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krcFLKZK9ik> Accessed 27.06.19.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2nZ1HDT450> Accessed 27.06.19.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Løland, OJ. 2020. The Political Conditions and Theological Foundations of the New Christian Right in Brazil. *Iberoamericana – Nordic Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 49(1): pp. 63–73. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/iberoamericana.495>

Submitted: 10 February 2020

Accepted: 30 September 2020

Published: 16 October 2020

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Iberoamericana – Nordic Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies, History is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Stockholm University Press.

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