

Evangelicals conquer Brazil

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Le Monde Diplomatique – English Edition, November 2014

Brazil is still the most Catholic nation in the world, but the new evangelical churches, with their conservative worldview, working-class congregations and offers of social help, are a powerful electoral force.

Silas Malafaia, an influential evangelical minister, tweeted on 30 August that if Marina Silva of the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) didn't "take a position [against same-sex marriage] by Monday, she'll get one of the harshest speeches I've ever made about a presidential candidate." Silva was standing in the presidential election and for a time seemed to be a serious contender. (She came third in the first round; Dilma Rousseff, already president since 2010, narrowly won the run-off in late October.) Silva's manifesto, published on 29 August, broke a taboo: it said that if elected she would support legislation to allow same-sex marriage.

Homosexual marriage has been legal in Brazil since a Supreme Court decision in May 2013. "But it's a legal precedent that could still be overturned by conservative judges. As long as there is no law, our rights are not protected," said Jean Wyllys, Brazil's only openly homosexual member of parliament. Silva's declaration was remarkable since she claims to be a practising member of the Assembly of God, a socially conservative, Pentecostalist evangelical church ([1](#)).

Malafaia's tweet turned out to be a pivotal event in Brazilian politics: a few hours later, Silva did a U-turn. "You lied to us, you played on the hopes of millions of people — you don't deserve the trust of the Brazilian people," said Wyllys, who had praised Silva's manifesto though he was backing another candidate. Silva was not alone in courting the millions of evangelicals: all the candidates, including Rousseff, had set up committees to win their vote.

Brazil is undergoing a religious revolution. In 1970, 92% of the population claimed to be Catholic, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics; in 2010 only 64.4%. "Brazil is unique: it's the only large country to have seen such a profound change in its religious landscape in so short a time," said José Eustáquio Alves of the National School of Statistical Science in Rio de Janeiro. The change is due to the growth of the evangelical churches, particularly the Pentecostalists and Neo-Pentecostalists. (Lutheran, Baptist and Methodist membership is stable.) Evangelicals have gone from 5% to 22% of the population in 40 years. With 23 million believers, Brazil is still the world's largest Catholic country — but not for long, according to Eustáquio Alves, who calculates evangelicals and Catholics should be neck-and-neck by 2030.

The urban landscape illustrates this change. The Rio de Janeiro square popularly known as Cinelândia, on which stand the Municipal Theatre and the National Library, got its nickname from the many cinemas built there the early 20th century. Almost all are gone, and the film posters have been replaced by prayers

to Jesus, and the names of chapels in neon — Universal Church, God is Love, World Church of the Kingdom of God. (It's the same in the centre of every major Brazilian city; by contrast, many small cinemas have opened in the suburbs.)

Latin American cities for centuries had a central square with a town hall and church, but rapid expansion because of immigration has changed this. The evangelical churches have adapted with a flexibility “of which the Catholics have shown themselves to be incapable,” said Cesar Romero Jacob of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro.

It's the same in Amazonia, on Brazil's agricultural frontier, its wild west. Geographer Hervé Théry, of the University of São Paulo, explains: “Every time I arrive in a new settlement, I find three wooden huts, a pharmacy and a chapel: somewhere you can get medical help and somewhere you can get moral comfort — essential in these harsh surroundings.” He sees the same in city suburbs, neglected by the state. “The evangelical churches provide a kind of social aid, leisure activities and a genuine listening ear, which the Catholic Church has almost given up doing. It's one of the reasons for their success.”

A church for surfers

In central Rio more than 75% claim to be Catholic, but only 30% in the suburbs. “The changes are due not so much to poverty as to segregation,” said Romero Jacob. Suburban development is chaotic. Housing is unsanitary (often built without authorisation), there are few sewers, and it's a long way to the nearest hospital or clinic. Gangsters with links to local politicians control public transport, and drug dealers or militias recruited among former police officers are in charge of law and order.

People are bored. Elaine Souza, 32, a resident of Queimados, in the suburbs of Rio, was baptised Catholic and converted in the last decade. She works as a cleaner in the Copacabana district and commutes by public transport, which takes five hours a day. (At least she gets to see the famous beach, where many of her neighbours have never been.) Queimados has no public library, no square — “not even a bakery.” There are just two tiny bars where the men fritter away their pay on shots of cachaça, the sugarcane-based spirit.

The neighbourhood evangelical chapel is not only Souza's moral support, it's her only leisure facility. The congregation put on shows for Mother's Day and Christmas, cook together, encourage each other to return to education (most dropped out of primary school). Souza hopes that by getting her teenage daughter involved she can save her from the typical suburban fate of getting pregnant, or becoming infatuated with a minor drug dealer, and leaving school too early.

The strong attendance at the chapel proves its appeal. The services are far removed from Catholic masses conducted by priests who often have little contact with the local community. During chapel worship, people sing and bear witness, achieving collective catharsis.

The Vatican broadcasts a single message through priests with a long training, recruited according to criteria that exclude women and demand celibacy. The Neo-Pentecostals are more flexible. Anyone can call himself a minister: the requirements are to have been “called by God”, some charisma, and a little theology (in some churches, three months’ study is enough). The bigger churches, such as the Assembly of God, have some checks and controls, but a minister who does not want to face these can found his own church and target a given social group with a made-to-measure message. Some preach austerity, others the accumulation of wealth; there is a Snowball church for surfers, and a Church of Christ’s Athletes for football fans. “What we are seeing is segmentation, following the principles of marketing,” said Mário Schweriner of the marketing institute Escola Superior de Propaganda y Marketing (ESPM) in São Paulo, who specialises in the relationship between religion and the economy.

‘Success here and now’

The Catholic Church has repressed members who talked of class struggle under liberation theology, and in an unequal society its call to maintain the status quo is increasingly rejected by the working class. “Instead of sermons that talk of making sacrifices in this life to attain paradise in the next, the Neo-Pentecostal churches preach a hedonistic materialism that promises success here and now,” said sociologist Saulo de Tarso Cerqueira Baptista of the State University of Pará.

Their message is all the more effective because most politicians have given up the struggle against injustice. “When a society believes it’s incapable of solving its problems by social, political and economic means, it ends up ascribing a supernatural character to those problems,” said De Tarso Cerqueira Baptista. The minister’s healing hands can drive out the demons of unemployment, of alcohol, of poor school performance. Jesus can cure cancer and AIDS.

But to ensure the Saviour’s favour, it’s important to pay *dizimo* (tithes) to the minister, by cash, cheque or card. Most believers accept this willingly. “I know that if I lose my job, my brothers and sisters in the church will give me food and a cylinder of gas, and help me find a new job,” said Souza. Having to pay tithes also encourages church members to cut back on vices such as drinking and smoking.

“Paying *dizimo* gives people a sense of belonging at a time when the state is absent and family is breaking down,” said Romero Jacob. Ministers have harnessed the growth of the new middle class (40 million have come out of poverty in the last decade). According to Denise Rodrigues of Rio de Janeiro State University, “Material success is seen as proof that you have been chosen by God. If you are earning more and more money, you will tend to associate your progress with membership of your church, and become even more involved in it.”

Church membership has its conventions, which have created new markets for evangelical music and television. And in the working-class district of Brás in São Paulo, centre of the textile industry, modest evangelical fashion is all the rage. The leading brand is Joyaly, launched in the 1990s. “At the time, church members had to wear long, shapeless skirts. That’s why our mother started making

clothes,” said Alison Flores, who runs the business with her designer sister Joyce. “There are rules: no low-cut necklines, no transparent fabrics, and shoulders must be covered,” said Joyce. “But we don’t dress like grandmothers. No dark colours and badly cut clothes for us. I take my inspiration from European collections and adapt them to the requirements of our faith.” In the 2000s, Joyaly had nearly 30% annual growth; it is not expanding so fast today, but that’s because it now has 30 competitors.

In Liberdade, the Japanese district of São Paulo, a whole street, Conde de Sardezas, is given over to evangelical businesses. There are T-shirts, caps and coffee cups praising Jesus, and evangelical-approved toys. The most popular item is the Bible, Brazil’s best-selling book. “Some of my customers have 20 or 30 — they collect them,” said Antonio Carlos, manager of the Total Gospel store. One of the greatest successes is the *Women’s Bible*, which includes prayers relating specifically to family and marriage; the *Giant Bible*, heavily gilded, is for display in living rooms.

Jesus on the hit parade

In a country where piracy is rife, the market for Christian music is an exception. Fifteen of the 20 best-selling albums are by religious singers, some Catholic, most evangelical. Jesus is praised in samba, sertanejo (Brazilian country music), rock and rap by artists who include austere religious ministers, short fat men in cowboy hats and young women trying hard to look demure. All the record companies, which previously scorned this niche, now have their own gospel label. “When I started, we were singing in garages. Now all the studios want us, and we have radio stations dedicated entirely to our music,” said Eshyla, 42, a star in this market; she is the wife of an evangelical minister, and travels all over Brazil giving concerts that attract thousands. Her latest hit is *Jesus, Brazil is going to worship you!* She has signed with Central Gospel Music, the label owned by Malafaia.

“In making use of the entertainment industry, the evangelical churches have got their hands on a formidable communications tool,” said Valdemar Figueiredo Filho, of ESPM in Rio de Janeiro. “The most successful ministers have a chapel, a radio station, a TV station, and then a record label. Each enhances the next, and raises their profile.”

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (“Universal”) led by Emier Macedo, already owns two publishing houses, a travel agency and an insurance company, and distributes a high-quality free newspaper, *Folha Universal*, with a circulation of 1.8m (the prestigious *Folha de S. Paulo* has only 300,000). Universal has owned Rede Record, Brazil’s second largest television station, since 1989. The station’s religious content is limited to late-night programmes, but Universal rents airtime on other channels, as do dozens of competing churches. Universal also provides content to more than 40 radio stations.

Figueiredo Filho calculates that evangelical churches control more than 25% of all Brazilian FM radio stations, and put out more than 130 hours of content a

week on four national terrestrial television channels. (Evangelical ministers take up 22 hours of airtime a day on Rede 21.) “It goes against the spirit of the law,” said João Brant, of Intervozes, an NGO campaigning for media democratisation. “These are public concessions, which the TV channels are renting out without authorisation.” The constitution does not permit this. “Even if religious programmes are considered as advertising, they should not exceed a quarter of total programming time.” Every year, Intervozes lobbies the Brazilian Congress to clarify the law. “And we run up against the same old problem: the bills are blocked by Christian members of Congress.”

The centre of evangelical political power is in the Congress, an Evangelical Front uniting “brothers in faith” across political parties. Currently the Front has 73 members in the Chamber of Deputies (out of 513) and three members in the Senate (out of 81). Every Wednesday, they meet in a room at the Congress for prayers, with singing and preaching.

Parliamentary activism

Their rising influence is due to Brazil’s electoral system. The number of seats allocated to each political party is based on a combination of the number of votes won by its candidates and by the party itself (voters are free to choose between these two ways of voting). If a candidate attracts a large number of votes, his party will receive more seats. This is an advantage for charismatic leaders, particularly those who have access to television. They are known as *puxadores de votos* (vote vacuum-cleaners).

In fact the system benefits all celebrities. In 2010 the member of the Chamber of Deputies with the most votes (1.35m) was a clown, Francisco Everardo Oliveira da Silva, known as Tiririca — very popular, but with no political experience. The large number of votes he won ensured the election of four candidates for his coalition. Some 270 evangelical ministers well known from their television appearances stood in the October election; only 193 had stood in 2010.

Trust is also a factor. “Brothers vote for brothers,” said Rodrigues. Candidates from evangelical churches are considered more trustworthy by members of those churches, who are typically working-class, under-educated and more likely to follow the advice of their “guides”. Malafaia is aware of this. When asked about his influence, he replied: “I’m not interested in standing for election. I like to wield influence behind the scenes. At local level, we are able to impose any candidate we like. At the last municipal elections, I fielded a candidate who is unknown to the general public, but well known to evangelicals: he was one of those who won the most votes.” In any election based on proportional representation, this has a considerable impact. “But,” said Figueiredo Filho, “the same is not true in first-past-the-post elections, since evangelicals are far fewer than half the total population. Then we have to negotiate.”

“At the second round,” said Malafaia, “we plan to sit down with each of the two candidates, and ask them, ‘Do you want our support? If so, you will have to sign a document promising to oppose certain pieces of legislation.’ That’s politics.”

Evangelicals sit on committees dealing with major social issues. They have 14 of the 36 seats on Brazil's human rights commission, which allows them to intervene on bills relating to homosexuals, abortion, drugs or sex education. They also have a more discreet presence on the technology and communications commission (14 of 42 seats), ready to block any law on radio and television that could limit their media influence.

"As we make up only 15% of federal deputies, we form alliances with other groups to make our views felt," said Paulo Freire, who heads the Evangelical Front. The most natural support comes from Catholic deputies opposed to the liberalisation of morals. Sometimes there is an exchange of favours: agribusiness will vote with the evangelicals today in exchange for their support tomorrow. "And sometimes we paralyse the parliament by being absent when there's a vote on a bill the government is supporting, so that there's a problem getting a quorum," said Freire.

Courting the evangelicals

During Rousseff's first term of office, the evangelical churches forced the withdrawal of an anti-homophobia education kit for schools and a video on fighting AIDS, aimed at homosexuals. They have also been successful in opposing abortion. "The feminists are now having to defend the meagre rights they had won," said Naara Luna of Rio de Janeiro State University. "In the 1990s, 70% of bills relating to abortion advanced the cause of legalisation; during the 2000s, 78% of bills went the other way."

The 2010 election was dominated by the abortion debate. Between the first and second rounds, pressure from religious groups forced Rousseff to publish a letter in which she declared that she was "personally" opposed to it. This year, same-sex marriage has been the dominant issue.

Every candidate has to court the evangelicals without scaring off Catholics or secular Brazilians. When Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva stood for president for the fourth time in 2002, he chose José Alencar for vice-president. The millionaire businessman not only had the trust of part of the business sector, but was also a member of the Liberal Party (PL), one of the most evangelical at the time. Since then Rousseff's Workers' Party (PT) has been trying to build links with the Pentecostals, involving them in government. Federal senator Marcello Crivella, a bishop in the Universal Church, was given a ministerial post in the first Rousseff government.

Figueiredo Filho sees the reaction against the rise of the evangelical churches as hypocritical: "Catholic intervention was considerable, but it was less visible. The bishop had direct access to the governor; the evangelicals had to elect members of parliament." All the media reported that Rousseff and key figures in the political establishment had attended the inauguration of the Universal Church's huge Temple of Solomon in São Paulo on 31 July. But visits to the Vatican get little media attention. "Catholicism is inseparable from Brazilian culture. With the

evangelicals, we're seeing changes that are unwelcome because the religious landscape is changing so rapidly."

Some Brazilians feel religion should be kept out of politics. The number of people with "no religion" is growing, as are those who claim affiliation to no institution (which does not mean they are atheists). Until the 1970s they were fewer than 1% of the population; in 1991 4.7% and in 2010 8%. A recent study by the Pereira Passos Institute in the Rio favelas shows that 33% of those between 14 and 24 claim to have no religion. Even among the evangelicals, the number of believers rejecting affiliation with any institution rose from 0.3% to 4.8% between 2000 and 2010. This puzzles researchers. "It may be a sign that some evangelicals can't relate to the radical stance of their leaders," said Romero Jacob.

"Marches for Jesus" attract hundreds of thousands, but so do gay pride parades — with more than three million marchers, the São Paulo parade is the biggest in the world. There are even evangelical churches aimed at homosexuals who have been rejected by traditional denominations. "The violence of religious leaders — evangelical and Catholic alike — is also a reaction to the way that Brazil is changing and opening up," said Maria Luiza Heilborn of Rio de Janeiro State University.