



Embattled Majorities and Ascendant Minorities: The Shifting Landscape of Religion and Politics in Brazil

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of religion in the changing political environment of Brazil focusing on the 2022 presidential contest between Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party (PT) and Jair Bolsonaro of the Liberal Party. Looking at media produced by the evangelical Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and its assertion of the incompatibility of Christianity with progressive principles, I contrast this against the traditional Catholic perspective which has historically supported progressive politics and the PT in Brazil. I argue that the emergence of narratives denying the compatibility of progressive principles and Christianity indicates the growing influence of right-wing evangelicalism in Brazilian politics embodied in figures like Pablo Marçal. This article contextualizes this transformation within Brazil's broader history, illustrating how religious engagement shapes political outcomes. It also calls into question the future of leftist politics in a nation increasingly influenced by right-wing evangelicalism.

Keywords: Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, Lula, Evangelicalism, Christianity

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In 2022, during a Brazilian presidential campaign that saw Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the center-left former president representing the Workers' Party (PT), face off against Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right incumbent of the Liberal Party (PL), the official news outlet of the evangelical Universal Church of the Kingdom of God published a piece entitled "Five Reasons Why It Is Impossible to Be a Christian and on the Left." It presents key arguments that supposedly illustrate the incompatibility of Christianity with progressive principles, namely: family; governance; belief; sides; and unity.

The piece argues that the family—implicitly constructed in nuclear heteronormative terms—is foundational to society and fosters harmony and good citizenship, while claiming that leftist ideologies undermine traditional family structures and promote harmful behaviors that lead to social decay. It posits also that leftist movements historically produce oppressive regimes that persecute Christians, citing examples such as China and North Korea. Furthermore, it asserts that Christianity is fundamentally rooted in a belief in God and the sacrifice of Jesus, whereas Marxism, a pillar of left-wing thought, advances a materialist worldview that denies the existence of the divine.

The author cites the Gospel of Matthew— "All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left"—and Ecclesiastes— "The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left"— to illustrate that aligning with the left equates to being on the wrong side of morality. Lastly, it is argued that Christianity promotes unity under God's guidance, while leftist movements thrive on division and conflict, manipulating societal differences for political gain.¹ This Manichean schematic has proven remarkably powerful in the recent political history of Brazil, the fourth-biggest democracy in the world. It is worth dwelling on its purveyor in order to gain a better understanding of the contours of Brazil's political landscape today.

"Universal," as the church is often called, is one of the largest and most influential religious organizations in Brazil. Founded in 1977 by Edir Macedo, it has ballooned to boast millions of followers across the country and beyond. Its influence extends beyond the spiritual realm, as it operates a vast network of media outlets, including television channels and radio stations, which help disseminate its teachings and reach a broader audience. Universal is known for its aggressive evangelism and distinctive practices, such as faith healing and prosperity theology, which resonate with many Brazilians seeking hope and stability amid economic uncertainty and political polarization. Additionally, its sociopolitical engagement has made it a notable player in Brazilian politics, with members often holding significant positions in government. This combination of religious, media, and political influence has solidified the church's prominent role in contemporary Brazilian society. "The success of [Universal's] trajectory, particularly in the political-religious field," according to Rafael Lopez Villasenor, "was achieved with bold strategies, which began with the choice of candidates and the coalition with right-wing parties, whose principles and ideologies fit perfectly with the ideas and beliefs of the Universal Church (especially with the PL)."²

Right-wing evangelicals exerting political power is not a new phenomenon in the United States, but it is still something of a novelty in Brazil, which has been losing ground as the largest Catholic country in the world for decades. In 1940, some 95% of the population identified as Catholic. Self-described evangelicals accounted for only 2.7%. In 2000, 74% called themselves Catholic, while evangelicals had grown

1 Cardoso, Renato. "5 motivos que mostram que é impossível ser cristão e ser de esquerda," *Folha Universal*, January 23, 2022, <https://www.universal.org/noticias/post/5-motivos-que-mostram-que-e-impossivel-ser-cristao-e-ser-de-esquerda/>.

2 Lopez Villasenor, Rafael. "A estratégia política da Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus: um estudo sobre as eleições presidenciais 1989, 1994 e 2002," *Ponto-e-Vírgula: Revista de Ciências Sociais*, 8 (2010), p. 163.

to 15.6%.³ Today, evangelicals are about a third of the population, with Catholics having fallen to about 50%.⁴ With estimates indicating that a majority of Brazilians will claim an evangelical religious identity by 2032, the country seems poised, as journalist Isabella Alonso Panho put it, to “abandon the religion of its birth.”⁵ The process by which Brazilian evangelicals—Neo-Pentecostals especially, given their preponderance among this segment of the population—have asserted themselves as an indispensable part of a reanimated far right has been arguably the most important development in Brazilian politics over the past decade.⁶ This spiritual realignment is deeply political.

In broad strokes, the country’s political center of gravity, in religious terms, has shifted from a baseline Catholicism that helped foster progressive grassroots mobilization during the transition from military rule in the 1980s to a more reactionary, evangelical strain that is more likely to venerate individual wealth and entrepreneurship. If Lula embodies the former, Pablo Marçal, a wealthy social media influencer and self-help guru who shockingly finished third in the 2024 São Paulo mayoral race, exemplifies the latter. Whereas Lula has come to embrace conciliation, patience, and institutionalism over the course of his long political career, the 38-year-old Marçal represents a type of radical disruption. A self-proclaimed right-wing evangelical, he is eager to attack all avatars of the existing political order in service of a nominally libertarian economic agenda. Marçal’s sharp elbows have led to his being barred from running for office for eight years and, more to the point, have placed him in direct conflict with some of the most prominent Neo-Pentecostal faith leaders on the right, including Pastor Silas Malafaia, who called Marçal a “farse,” “crook,” and “manipulator.”⁷

In a very real sense, there is a political battle underway for the soul of Brazilian voters. While it would be easy to read this discussion as insinuating that Catholicism is generally progressive and pro-democracy while evangelical faith is uniformly not, that is not what I mean to suggest. Rather, I seek to highlight that the form, substance, and political outcomes of religious engagement are historically contingent. Progressive Catholics were foundational to the creation of the PT due to a host of specific historical conditions, not because Catholicism naturally tends to support left-wing working-class organization. Likewise, evangelical faith is not necessarily reactionary. Thus, the best way to understand the claim that it is impossible to be a leftist Christian—an assertion made by Marçal as well—is not as an indisputable religious precept but as an attempt to seize a political advantage. Lula and Marçal have wildly divergent political projects and religious conceptions. In both religious and electoral terms, an embattled majority—be it Catholics or the electorate that thrice elevated Lula to the presidency—is at risk of being overtaken by an ascendant minority—far-right in political terms and evangelical by spiritual disposition. This is the tense dynamic undergirding the politics of Latin America’s largest nation today.

3 Figures cited in Silveira Campos, Leonildo. “Os Mapas, Atores e Números da Diversidade Religiosa Cristã Brasileira: Católicos e Evangélicos entre 1940 e 2007,” *Revista de Estudos da Religião* 8 (December 2008), p. 13.

4 Alonso Panho, Isabella. “Pesquisa aponta que quase um terço dos brasileiros já trocou de religião,” *Veja*, June 3, 2024, <https://veja.abril.com.br/brasil/pesquisa-aponta-que-quase-um-terco-dos-brasileiros-ja-trocou-de-religiao>.

5 Ibid.

6 See Nobre, Fábio, André Mendes Pini, and Maria Eduarda Angeiras de Menezes. “O neopentecostalismo no Brasil e a convergência com a ultradireita no populismo reacionário de Jair Bolsonaro,” *Revista de Iniciação Científica em Relações Internacionais* 11, no. 21 (October 26, 2023): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.22478/ufrpb.2318-9452.2023v11n21.66917>.

7 “Pablo Marçal inegável por 8 anos: o que se sabe sobre decisão judicial,” *BBC*, February 21, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/articles/cz61jldqo8zo>; Igor Gadelha and Milena Teixeira, “Malafaia provoca Marçal: ‘Está calminho porque caiu na pesquisa,’” *Metrópoles*, September 20, 2024, <https://www.metropoles.com/colunas/igor-gadelha/malafaia-provoca-marcal-esta-calminho-porque-caiu-na-pesquisa>. On Malafaia, see Pagliarini, Andre. “Tongues of Fire: Silas Malafaia and the Historical Roots of Neo-Pentecostal Power in Bolsonaro’s Brazil,” *Latin American Perspectives* 50, no. 1 (January 1, 2023): 179–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X221147593>.

Having lent institutional support to the conservative mobilizations that preceded the 1964 military coup, the Catholic Church eventually played a pivotal role in driving resistance to authoritarianism and organizing clandestine efforts to document human rights abuses committed by the regime. This occurred against the backdrop of the rise of liberation theology, a movement that emerged in Latin America in the early 1960s, emphasizing the importance of solidarity with the poor and marginalized and advocating for structural change to address inequality. Many Catholic priests, theologians, and laypeople aligned themselves with grassroots movements, promoting collective action against the military dictatorship and its economic policies, which often favored elites and multinational corporations over the interests of the poor and working class. One of the key expressions of this was the Church's active participation in the broader struggle for democratic restoration in Cold War Latin America, which included providing sanctuary for political dissidents, organizing popular resistance, and engaging in civil disobedience.

In Brazil, many Catholic clergy and lay activists, particularly within the context of the Catholic Church's base ecclesial communities (CEBs), embraced a form of liberation theology that championed social justice, workers' rights, and the fight against poverty and oppression—and, eventually, party-building. The CEBs became important spaces for political education and mobilization, organizing strikes, protests, and community resistance, while also fostering a sense of collective empowerment among workers, peasants, and the urban poor.⁸ This activism was not without controversy, often placing local Catholic leaders into direct conflict with the Vatican and the Brazilian bishops' conference, which were more conservative and aligned with the status quo. By the late 1970s, however, as political repression loosened and the dictatorship entered a period of gradual transition, the seeds planted by progressive Catholic grassroots movements began to bear fruit.

As many have already pointed out, the PT almost certainly would not exist without the investment of Catholic activists.⁹ Many of the party's founding members were former union leaders, intellectuals, and activists who had been shaped by the Church's liberation theology and had worked alongside Catholic groups in the fight for social and political change at the neighborhood and municipal level. The PT thus emerged not only as a political party but as a continuation of the struggle for justice and equality that had been championed by progressive Catholics throughout the dictatorship. The Church's role in nurturing a generation of politically conscious activists and providing moral authority for the struggle against oppression was crucial in the formation of the PT, which would go on to become one of Brazil's most powerful political parties. That postdictatorial moment produced a close imbrication of Catholic activism within partisan construction and democratic consolidation. But the PT's institutionalization over the course of the 1990s, a fraught aspect of its national growth, pushed it ever further from the grassroots political organizing that had been the driving force behind the CEBs. That activism was hardly a failure—it galvanized a generation and changed national politics forever—but it had mostly run its course.

In hindsight, the decline of progressive Catholic organizing at the neighborhood level would establish the conditions for the rise of Neo-Pentecostal churches, which infused their preaching with an entrepreneurial logic, even as they set about providing many of the same basic social support services the Catholic Church had once provided. If liberation theology was the path to an association between Catholics and progressive politics in a prior historical moment, the Prosperity Gospel is the key to understanding the link between Neo-Pentecostalism and far-right politics today. The Prosperity Gospel emerged in the United States after World War II and is largely

8 On the role of CEBs in the transition from military rule, see Hewitt, W. E. "Religion and the Consolidation of Democracy in Brazil: The Role of the Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (CEBs)." *Sociological Analysis* 51, no. 2 (1990): 139–52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3710811>.

9 For example, Catholic activists are central to the narrative in de Barros, Celso Rocha. *PT, uma história* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2022).

associated with televangelist Oral Roberts, whose “Seed-Faith” teachings linked financial donations to divine blessings. Prosperity Gospel churches often promise that financial and personal blessings are attainable through donations and tithing, creating a close, enduring bond between religious belief and economic aspiration. In a country like Brazil, where economic inequality remains a persistent issue, the Prosperity Gospel offers a compelling narrative of hope and upward mobility while elevating prominent faith leaders as economic success stories. It provides a spiritual framework that aligns well with the aspirations of many Brazilians, who see it as a way not only to improve their material conditions but also to secure social status and personal success.

The influence of evangelicals in Brazilian politics has only grown since, thanks to their overwhelming support, Bolsonaro won the presidency in 2018. Indeed, new figures like Marçal, sensing a political opening in the electoral-social media-religious arena, have emerged as new contenders. As mentioned above, Marçal, a savvy Prosperity Gospel preacher with a strong online presence, leveraged his religious identity to run for mayor of São Paulo in 2020, positioning himself as a political outsider who could bring both spiritual and economic renewal to the Southern Hemisphere’s biggest metropolis. His platform blended religious rhetoric with promises of personal empowerment and economic prosperity. It resonated with many evangelical voters who felt disconnected from traditional political elites—including, surprisingly, Bolsonaro and Malafaia to a great extent.¹⁰ With a presidential run promised in 2026, Marçal’s political rise highlights the increasing influence of explicitly evangelical leaders who combine faith-based messaging with entrepreneurial savvy, tapping into the shifting landscape of religious engagement in a country growing less Catholic by the year.

The growing political clout of the Prosperity Gospel movement presents both opportunities and significant challenges to traditional parties, including the PT. According to a December 2024 poll, 56% of self-proclaimed Catholics approved of Lula’s government compared with only 42% of evangelicals.¹¹ Although he proclaims his Catholic faith, not all Catholics support Lula, of course. In addition to evangelicals, many conservative Catholics back the far right in Brazil today, appreciating its vocal rejection of the significant social changes that have taken place in Brazil since the return to democracy in the 1980s. They enthusiastically supported Bolsonaro because of his outspoken opposition to abortion, LGBTQ rights, feminism, the Black movement, environmental protection, and indigenous rights. The PT was born from the activism of progressive Catholics inspired by liberation theology, combined with left-wing activists pushing for collective mobilization. Bolsonarismo, by contrast, emerged in part from a strain of Christianity much more likely to embrace individual economic success and free-market principles.

Lula’s political identity, strategy, and discourse took shape at a time when Catholic sociopolitical hegemony was much more lightly contested than it is today. Rather than an explicit avatar of Catholic political action, he embodies an era in which Catholics eagerly organized with progressive activists of various ideological stripes. That era has passed. Bolsonaro and, to a greater extent, Marçal represent an ideal of ceaseless self-promotion that eschews party-building and collective mobilization in favor of messianic branding around a charismatic leader. Lula has always been an institutionalist, whether in favor of his union or his political party. “He never sought an unmediated relationship between atomized individuals and an anointed savior,” an element usually deemed “central to ‘charismatic’ or ‘populist’ leadership,”

10 See Costa, Ranieri. “Direita evangélica está rachada? O que embate Marçal x Bolsonaro mostra,” *UOL*, September 18, 2024, <https://noticias.uol.com.br/eleicoes/2024/09/18/marcal-x-bolsonaro-expoe-as-divisoes-da-direita-evangelica.htm>.

11 Porto, Douglas. “Quaest: 52% aprovam o trabalho de Lula; 47% desaprovam,” *CNN Brasil*, December 11, 2024, https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/quaest-52-aprovam-o-trabalho-de-lula-47-desaprovam/#goog_rewarded.

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as historian John French wrote in his landmark biography of Lula.¹² That is not the case of Marçal, who will surely inspire a bumper crop of imitators in the years to come. Indeed, it now remains to be seen how the political project Lula represents will fare in a landscape undergoing rapid political-religious change, particularly once he leaves the scene.

¹² French, John D. *Lula and His Politics of Cunning: From Metalworker to President of Brazil* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2020), p. 270.