

Evangelicals in Brazilian Politics: The Homosexual Issue

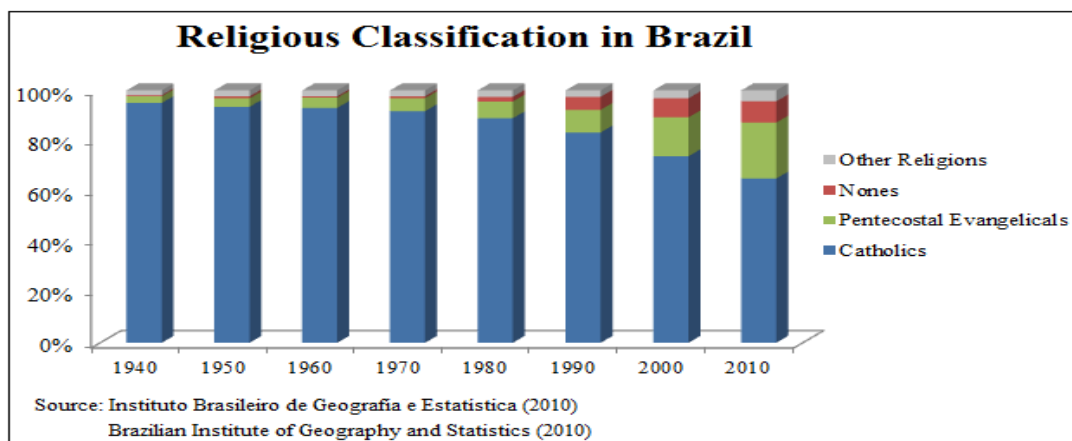
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Abstract: This paper presents the consequences of the growth of the Evangelical population in Brazilian politics. In such way, it is made an analysis of the historical role of religion in Brazilian politics, especially concerning the Catholic tradition, with the changes the Evangelicals carried to the role of religious institutions in Brazilian society. Therefore, the homosexual issue is brought to question as an object to illustrate the recent shift of roles the religious institutions have in politics in Brazil.

Keywords: Religion; Politics; Evangelicals; Homosexuality.

1. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the foundation of society and the political system in Brazil, it is impossible to conceal the importance of the Catholic Church over them. Catholicism has been the majoritarian religion in the country since the beginning of the colonization of its lands in the 16th century, and it was not by accident: the main Portuguese settlers were the Jesuits, whose exercise was the main tool the crown made use of to establish social, political and cultural dominations (AZEVEDO, 2004). Nevertheless, even though the Catholic Church had a historical central role in society and in the government, it has lost its influence over the Brazilian scenario, where each time less people proportionally consider themselves Catholics.



In the last 30 years, the Catholic Church started to lose followers mainly to the “nones” (individuals who claim to have no religion in especial) and to the Evangelical Pentecostal Church – which had brought Christian radicalism into society. In the 70’s, 92% were Catholics, a share that dropped to 89%, 83%, 74% and 65%, in the respective decades. On the opposite, the “nones” progressively changed from 1% in the 70’s, to 2%, 5%, 7.6% and 8.4% in the following decades; and the Pentecostal Evangelicals sharply increased from 5% in the 70’s, to 7%, 9%, 15% and 22%, all this data according to IBGE – Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2010, (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics). As a consequence, the relation between religion and politics obtained a new shape in Brazil, one with much more conflict among parts in society. Therefore, this essay seeks to show these changes and its impacts, leaning on the homosexual issue to illustrate such inflections.

2. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND POLITICS IN BRAZIL

The Catholic Church was intimately connected to Brazil's colonization, not only because it was Portugal's official church by the 16th century, but because it was a tool to manage the lands in the New World. Firstly, having a social function, since the start of the colonization process, the Jesuits from the Society of Jesus were sent to the Portuguese colony in South America with the goal of evangelizing the native peoples who were historically established in the territory. As it was the beginning of European influence on the new continent, the Portuguese crown had the interest of affirming its lands *vis-à-vis* the Spanish expansion in South America, so their efforts were given to consolidate an organized Catholic Portuguese society, that would originally comprehend both the colonizers and the native people, on a mercantile economy based on exportation of materials. Such societal system would last until the middle decades of the 18th century, when the rationalist and illuminist Marques do Pombal would become the Secretary of State of Portugal in 1759, expelling the Jesuits and their influence over society (AZEVEDO, 2004).

The Catholic Church would only come back to play a more central role on Brazil on 1840, a few decades after the country's independence, but in a different way than before. At this moment, in Brazil, the Catholic Church was passing through a "Romanization" process, in order to be dependent from the Pope rather than from the Luso-Brazilian crown. This state of Church was much more lasting, and it is the one which would illustrate its current situation – even though it passed through a gradual consolidation: first, the clergy was formed, as an organized religious structure; then, in 1889, with the Republic Proclamation for the end of the Empire of D. Pedro II, the Church was separated from the State, as the militaries designed it; and, very importantly, in 1922, after being dethroned from its traditional spot, the Church opted to participate actively in the country's politics, which didn't happen before as its previous function was social, rather than political (AZEVEDO, 2004).

The new political attitude of the Catholic Church was a response to the liberal character of the Constitution of 1891, from the Republic Proclamation of 1889. Such document separated the State from the Church, on a search for secularism in the republic – opposed to the empire government of D. Pedro I and II; it implemented the law education on public schools; it established civil marriage; and it also introduced secular cemeteries. Not only, it defended pluralism with freedom of religion, treating confessional groups as equals before the law. All of those innovations, except liberty of religion, were condemned by the Catholic Church, which traditionally was 'the' Church in Brazil, having great power as it was bound to the State, during the colonization and the Empire (GIUMBELLI, 2008).

Thus, the Catholic Church's efforts were then focused on trying to make Catholicism organically established, despite the previous separation. As a result, on the Constitution of 1934, it could be seen that religious teaching returned to public schools, military chaplains were admitted to the army, and the State was subvented to care activities connected to the Church. These changes happened when President Vargas left aside, in the new constitution, the liberal principles of the previous one, in order to make profound statist arrangements. This was a moment when the Catholic Church was back to be very intimate with the State, and it lasted until the mid-50's, the decade when Vargas' Era ended to give space to the rise of the Cold War conflict between socialist and conservative candidates for presidency in domestic Brazilian politics (AZEVEDO, 2004).

The 60's were, then, the decade that shaped the way the Catholic Church behaved in politics until contemporaneity – as it became more politically defined about its position. By that moment, Brazil faced a Cold War dilemma, as the country was divided between those who sought socialist reforms and those who searched to maintain Brazil under the United States' capitalist influence. The political debate led to the military coup in 1964, which implemented a right-wing dictatorship, whose goal was to stop the communist flourishing – in a violent way, if necessary to maintain order. So, the Catholic Church positioned itself "on the left" and argued against such anti-democratic regime: it defended human rights, democratic liberties, land reform, labor rights, and the democratization of the society. The Church criticized the income concentration by the economy and the political system defended by the conservative militaries on exercise. Due to that, the Catholic Church was one of the actors of the promulgation of the Constitution of 1988 (especially to what concerned popular amendments), which would end the dictatorship and would inaugurate the New Republic, the current democratic system. Thereby, the Catholic Church positioned itself as a mean between society and the government, where it would bring social claims to the lawmakers apply them (AZEVEDO, 2004).

So, the way the Catholic Church inserted itself inside politics in the recent decades was much more socially than pragmatically. The church could not be neutral theologically, as it is a religious institution, but its political efforts were

not to simply preach its dogmas – after all, Brazilian society was already historically and traditionally Catholic. In the end, the Catholic Church became a mediator between social groups, for the pursuit of social homogeneity, of a social respondent economic system, of democracy, of fraternity in politics, of transformation, of fiscal balance, and, after all, of an ethic of principles, rather than an ethic of results at any costs in politics (AZEVEDO, 2004).

3. THE EVANGELICALS AND THE HOMOSEXUAL ISSUES IN POLITICS

The history of the Pentecostal Evangelicals is much more recent than the presence of the Catholic Church in Brazil – despite the fact that it is innovating and reshaping the role of religion in society and in politics. As the Catholics found their space in politics, more strongly, in the 50's and 60's, the Evangelicals had their rise on the mid-80's, a moment of a new political structure, of multiculturalism and, if it may, postmodernity. As Maia (2006) attested, the rise of the Evangelicals in Brazilian politics was due to a mixture of factors, such as structural, cultural, institutional and contextual to the democratization moment the country was passing through in the decade of 80, whose Constitution, by the way, affirmed Brazil as a secular State.

The first claim is that the party system in Brazil is unstable, and as a consequence, the voters and the politicians have no fidelity to them, due to the fact that they were created “from top to bottom”, and not naturally from the people and its demands. Once they are not genuine to social classes, and only recently were created in 1988, their identity would be too scrambled. Thus, there was lack of representativeness, where a lot of people wouldn't fit in a specific party. With such gap, there was an opportunity to the rising religion that sought to conquer big congregations: the Evangelicals could fit in as a political response to communities that had no representativeness.

Also, since the 80's, democracy has become more embracing, and society numerically grew in a sharp way, despite the fact that social and political mechanisms didn't follow such movement in the same speed. The public sphere was fragmented, and groups with different demands started to sprout. Marginalization became a very serious issue, and, as the government couldn't include the poorest communities in its planning and exercise, the Evangelical Church positioned itself also as a mediator, but not between society, in general, and the State, as the Catholic Church did in the 60's. It, differently, made the connection between the poorest communities and the political sphere – that was not able to embrace them. The Evangelical Churches would practice care actions in those communities, would create literacy programs, and health unities. In a certain way, it would substitute the State to those who needed it the most. And, in the private sphere, the Evangelical sect “invaded” homes, converting its people voluntarily, people who would start to be motivated and, consequently, would begin embracing social movements.

The third factor is that, in the process of secularization that Brazil has passed in the late decades of the 20th century, religion could become a potential social represent, as religion became incorporated on the principle of freedom of association, by the Constitution of 1988. Thus, many religions started to spread, with very diverse theologies and principles. Due to that, many different communities could embrace different theologies and cults. Such thing happened to the Evangelical sect, especially to what the ethics of prosperity concern, not condemning a poor person for wanting to earn money and to progress financially, like the Catholics more generally condemn (MAIA, 2006).

And the last factor, according to Maia (2006), is the political convenience the Evangelical Churches provided to congregations, due to the exposition the faithful people had and has *vis-à-vis* the religious leaders. In such way, it turned out being easy for the leaders to impose political guidance and preferences over their vulnerable audience and, as a consequence, the number of Evangelical politicians who were elected started to quickly increase in the government. Maia (2006) highlights its causes, giving credits to the two speeches the Evangelical Churches give to politically educate (or manipulate) their congregations: the laic one and the religious. The laic maintains the church's principles, but has a more secular approach, utilizing images as the sanctity of marriage, family values, material resources to communities and churches, and practical examples of Christian aspirations. The religious, on the other hand, is much more outrageous as it demonizes the political system, in a put scenario where the church could exercise the sacralization of the government, through a holy war, a spiritual battle, against Satan, that is found in corruption, nepotism, and any other political issues Brazil historically faces.

As a result, since the 80's, the growth of congregations impacted positively the increase of votes Evangelicals received to the legislative and to executive powers. According to Severo (2011), on 2010 elections, the number of Evangelicals on the Federal Chamber grew from 46 members (9% of the house) to 68 (13,2%); and, as Marés (2013) attests it, if the

Evangelical politicians formed a single party, they would currently be the third biggest one in the Federal Chamber, counting 76 members (2013). So, the State which proclaimed itself as neutral and secular now faces a consequence of that. Not only, as religions could grow due to the freedom of affiliation, they could also have represents among lawmakers and politicians in the executive. Such inflection, in fact, is not so disconnected from the religious speeches the churches have, and Evangelical principles and goals were brought to discussion and approval through the chambers.

Some of their projects are concerned to pro-life policies. For example, the Evangelical bench created the bill 1.763/2007, in which the government would pay a monthly minimum wage during 18 years for women who were raped and got pregnant, so they could keep the pregnancy and raise the child, in spite of making an abortion, which is illegal on many cases, but this one. However, the main topic that has been addressed by the Evangelical bench, and certainly has brought polemics into political discussions, was the homosexual issue, which also carried some politicians to the media and to press exposure (SEVERO, 2011).

According to Severo (2011), the first issue that involved the Evangelicals and homosexuals in the government was the created project by the Ministry of Education called “Schools free of homophobia kit”. Such left-wing oriented kit would clarify questions concerning sexual orientation diversity, in an attempt to end homophobic and prejudicial education, being distributed in High Schools all over the country, to break the taboo of homosexuality. However, such action would oppose the Christian principle of the “sanctity of marriage” and, hence, the Evangelicals organized a political ‘blackmail’ action against the ones who headed the project. Other than stopping to vote in any other project until the kit was suspended, the Gospel bench blackmailed the President of the Republic, threatening to summon the Chief of Staff of the Presidency to be investigated about his rapid enrichment. Such episode ended with the President Dilma Rousseff calling the “Gay Kit” as an inadequate project, to fix the situation.

Severo (2011) also points out another project that was vetoed by the Evangelical bench, which concerned half-price tickets to cultural activities for young people with ages between 15 and 29. The Evangelicals wanted to make sure that any sexual orientation content of the events would only follow the school’s guidance, but it was added to the project that the diversity of values and beliefs would be respected.

The homosexual marriage approval in 2011 also created friction with the Evangelicals as it also affected the “sanctity of marriage”. However, as the Supreme Court had already approved such modality, jurisprudence would not allow it to be reversed. So, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front wanted to guarantee, at least, that the churches would not be involved in such novelty. Thus, it was requested to be added an addendum where it would not be mandatory for churches to participate in homosexual marriages ceremonies, in any moment – even though the law of such type of marriage was only restricted to the civil code and not to the private religious one. Therefore, the Evangelical project was not approved, once it was groundless (SEVERO, 2011).

Nevertheless, the issue that brought more visibility to the Evangelical bench was on 2013, when the Gospel bench and the President of the Human Rights Committee (Marco Feliciano, who is also part of the Evangelical Front), proposed the “Gay Cure” project. The idea was to change the Brazilian Statute of Psychology, which currently denies the approach of cure for homosexual patients (as they claim homosexuality is not a disease to be cured). The Evangelicals wanted to change it, in order to fight against homosexuality, considering it a reversible status, in the Holy War against demons, as they preach. Such episode was strictly related to the street protests that happened in the streets of Brazil’s biggest cities in June 2013, where people demanded the cassation of Marco Feliciano, the Evangelical shepherd who adopted the ongoing project (FOREQUE; FALCÃO, 2013). However, the project was filed, and postponed to votes in 2014, with a new proposition, as it didn’t have enough votes to be approved by the Congress (PASSARINHO; COSTA, 2013).

And, passed the defeat episode of the “Gay Cure”, Marco Feliciano’s committee approved a law project that would exempt religious temples to be framed as discriminatory in case they deny the attendance of “people who violate their values, doctrines, beliefs and liturgies” (PASSARINHO, 2013). As Passarinho (2013) attests, such attempt was to make sure the churches would not be criminally responsible if they banned the entrance of homosexuals. Furthermore, the project would make a change on the 20th article of the law 7.716/1986, which charges from one to three years of prison the one who “induce or incite discrimination or prejudice based on race, color, ethnicity, religion or national origin”, so the discrimination of homosexuals by the churches could become legal (PASSARINHO, 2013).

Based on these attempts of law changes and the proactivity the Evangelicals in the government have on the enforcement of their principles, it can be said that their role in society and politics is much different than the Catholic Church has adopted, especially from the 50's and 60's. If the latter was a channel between society and the government, focusing mainly on social justice, the former is revolutionizing the relation between religion and politics in Brazil – which can be understood, as they are a fast growing religion. The Evangelical Church claims for sovereignty and for space to apply their principles over society and over the communities they preach in.

4. THE “NONES” AND SECULARISM IN BRAZIL

As the Evangelicals actively grow in society and in politics, they are not alone in the demographic transformation. The number of “nones” and seculars also increased in the late modern era, and not coincidentally – they are the ones who have been protesting specifically against the Evangelicals, among all other religions.

Something that has appeared on population census in the previous decades is growing as a transnational movement, which includes Brazil as well. The “nones”, people who answer “none” when asked about which is their religion, defied the religious status quo and showed that Brazil isn't necessarily an almost 100% Christian nation. On the last census, already 8.4% of the population declared themselves as “nones”, from not being able to classify themselves in any religion in particular.

Putnam and Campbell (2010), on “American Grace – How Religion Divides and Unites Us”, wrote about the “nones” phenomenon, specifically in the US; however, their conclusions might fit in the Brazilian terrain, as such occurrence happened by the same time it started in Brazil (end of years 80's, beginning of the 90's). As in America the terms “Religious Right” or “Christian Right”, used to define the politicians on the right, as religious conservatives, would lead to the estrangement of religion for some people; in Brazil the beginning of a multicultural, democratic regime, would open some minds in this demographic revolutionary moment in Brazil's history.

Such trend goes in the opposite way of the rise of Evangelicals in politics, as the “nones” represent the freedom of religion (as the separation between religion and politics), while the Evangelical would represent the freedom of religion as the possibility to be in society and in politics through a religion other than the Catholic. So, in the moment where the Catholic Church loses power both to Evangelicals and to “nones”, there would be changes and discussions about the future of politics in Brazil.

That is why on Brazilian protests of June 2013, one of the main complaints people had was against Marco Feliciano, the Evangelical shepherd who is the President of the Human Rights Committee. People, in fact, raised placards which had the writings “Marco Feliciano does not represent me”, condemning his political activities, which made part of the political complaints people were directing against the government.

Therefore this conflict, between “nones” plus seculars, and the religious personalities who are exercising in the government, certainly opens space to the discussion about which kind of State Brazil is and will become on these times of multiculturalism and representative democracy. Could Brazil be called a neutral State, as its Constitution of 1988 attests in the 19th article?

“The Union, the States, the Federal District and the Counties are forbidden to:

I – establish religious cults or churches, subsidize them, embarrass them, or maintain them or their representatives in dependency relationships or alliances, except, as provided by law, the collaboration of public interest;

II – refuse faith to public documents;

III – create distinctions or preferences among Brazilians”

(CONSTITUIÇÃO DA REPÚBLICA FEDERATIVA DO BRASIL, 1988)

Such article mainly reinforces the idea that all Brazilians are equal before the law and, due to that, the State cannot have connections to any particular cult or church, as it would be to favor a faith, a group, or a citizen over another. This idea matches to Kurland's (1961) definition of neutrality, as Laycock's (1989) article exposes:

“The [free exercise and establishment] clauses should be read as stating a single percept: that government cannot utilize religion as a standard for action or inaction because these clauses, read together as they should be, prohibit classification in terms of religion either to confer a benefit or to impose a burden” (KURLAND, 1961 *apud* LAYCOCK, 1989).

However, it does not fit on the fact that politicians use religious purposes as a standard for action. When the Evangelical bench defines homosexuality as something to be cured, or when it prohibits any kind of apology for this sexual orientation, it bases on Judeo-Christian conceptions from the Bible, which only consider heterosexual marriage, as God intended it to be for human reproduction. So, could these religious claims legally happen, in multicultural Brazil?

Despite all efforts the Evangelicals had for approving their law projects, most of them ended up filed due to a still reasonable secular conception of the majority of government members. But, in practice, considering the previously mentioned Evangelical attitudes and projects in government, such as the opposition to the “Gay Kit”, the contestation of homosexual intermarriage, with the refusal proposal to host it, the proposition of the “Gay Cure”, and the refusal to receive homosexuals on their cults, it seems that through government, the Evangelicals are making more efforts to maintain the integrity of their ideal society, stopping it from a secular progress, than to impose their values in a revolutionary sense for a new attempt of establishment. However, they still affect Brazilian democracy, even if their claims only concern the sovereignty of the church – as they try to violate some of the fundamental principles of the Constitution, as equality despite any feature.

March (2013) writes about the consequences of the religious reasoning, as he explains that the problem itself is not bringing religion as a political argument, but enforcing it just because it is written in some sacred document. The author calls it the “inclusive views” as an opposition to the exclusive perception the most extreme liberals have about religion in politics. As he cites Martin Luther King, he claims that even though the activist invoked Augustine to argue that “an unjust law is no law at all”, he was fighting for racial equality in the United States, rather than imposition of the Christian religion. However, there’s a limit for that:

“I do not intend to trivialize religious thought by reducing all valuable and acceptable religious arguments to generic statements of universal morality or particularly effective rhetorical tools. But I do intend to suggest that there is a limited set of moral claims (as opposed to isolated premises in arguments) that are both genuinely inaccessible to outsiders and entirely dependent on their original theistic foundations. Many religious arguments are put into the public sphere in a form (not just a spirit) that does not require their original revealed or theistic premises in order to be publically intelligible” (MARCH, 2013).

In this case, concerning only the fact that Evangelicals are members of the Federal Chamber and the fact that they use gospel arguments would not necessarily exclude the possibility of a secular State in Brazil. After all, it would be impossible for any politician to abandon all their beliefs and conceptions, secular or not, by the time their office hours start. However, the fighting against homosexuality is the line-crossing that violates the multiculturalism Brazil embraced and admitted with the Constitution of 1988. To this sense, trying to ban homosexuality or inhibit it would be dangerous to Brazilian secularism. A proof to that is the fact that none of the Evangelical projects who stir up hatred against this sexual orientation were approved by the other politicians. One way or another, may secular people hope for this situation to, at least, not grow: the majority of the Gospel bench would lead to a possible new establishment in the future. However, this new establishment, Evangelical, may not have any space for secularism.

5. CONCLUSION

A fact is that religion became a very strong issue inside Brazilian politics, after the secularization of the 1988 Federal Constitution. As the Catholic Church was traditionally the dominant and official Church in Brazil, it was not something to be really argued against, especially being their role in politics subtle, before the decades in which it led to a social justice approach. Even by this moment, social justice didn’t make the Catholic Church look as a villain to any kind of secularism or separation. Although not having a theological approach, it didn’t seem they were trying to rule society through religion, as they were not.

The rise of the Evangelical certainly changed the perception that at least parts of the society had about religious institutions in politics. As the Catholic Church was already a dominant power, which found a way to make its presence in politics as a mediator between society and the government, the Evangelicals are a growing movement, which tries to be

relevant in society and to spread its influence. However, the way the Evangelicals are doing it, is much different than the way the Catholics did it. The Evangelical Churches are acting on needy communities, with lack of government and resources, and, in that way, they are educating its people as Evangelicals and providing improvements in such communities.

In that sense, it is as if the Evangelicals do what the Jesuits did during colonization – but in a multicultural and in a much more politically developed society. And, as a tool, the Evangelical shepherds are in the government, preaching their values and working for improvements in those communities. In this way, the Evangelical activity in politics is more active religiously than the Catholics had been. After all, their actions and cults are very intimate to one another, and, in that way, they have a big support of their congregations in the elections.

So, as it can be seen, they are bringing religious issues as reasoning in politics, and they are using their principles as a rule to their political projects. This essay focused on the homosexual question, to illustrate such policies. The Evangelicals opposed to policies for ending homophobia in schools; proposed cure for homosexuality as one of the psychological goals; condemned homosexual intermarriage and tried to be able to ban any person who doesn't agree to their principles of entering their cults – which is illegal, even in the private sphere, by the Brazilian Constitution. Most of their proposals weren't successful, but as they sharply grow in representativeness in government, in some years or decades it may be possible.

This discussion proposes to think, then, what kind of religious regime there is in Brazilian politics. Is it there a real secular State, as the Constitution of 1988 presupposes? Or is it there a Brazilian own way of doing religion in politics, while existing a secular State?

As the history of the country shows, it might be hard to lose the establishment tradition and the influence of one or more religions in politics and in society. However, it is possible to build a secular State, despite that, at least while the religious politicians don't completely fulfill the Congress. Multiculturalism is a reality in Brazil, and it is reproduced inside politics, as there are “nones”, Jewish, Christian, homosexual and heterosexual politicians in the government. Therefore, what lasts out of it, is a State that is neutral to all of its citizens, at least for now.

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