

*Liberation Theology to Evangelicalism: The Rise of Bolsonaro and the Conservative Evangelical Advance in Post-Colonial Brazil*

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**Introduction**

Although Catholicism is presently the dominant religion in Brazil, the Evangelical churches have made significant inroads into the social and political life of Latin American states over the past 30 years. The current strength of the Evangelical churches is immediately visible in contemporary Brazil and they are major commercial crusad-

ers. In 1991, 9% of Brazilians identified as Evangelical while 83% were Catholic (Pena, 2012). In 2010, a joint study by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística and Fundação Getúlio Vargas, found that 20% of Brazilians identified as Evangelical and the number of Catholics had dropped to 68% (Ibid).

The number of Evangelical representatives and senators in politics has continued to increase in state and national political institutions. A survey by the Interunion Parliamentary Advisory Department, concluded that the Evangelical Congress Caucus has increased by 50% since 2008 to 63 representatives out of 513 and three senators out of 81, as of 2012. (Pena, 2012). In 2018, the Catholic-born but re-baptized as Evangelical, Jair Bolsonaro, became the Brazilian President.

Ignoring Brazil's boundaries of race and class, Evangelical churches have successfully penetrated Brazil's favelas, to convert the poorest to their doctrine (Hartropp, 2017). These mass conversions from Catholicism to Evangelism has had a profound impact on Brazilian social and political life. Brazil, the country with the world's largest Catholic population, and Latin America, a region which is synonymous with the Catholic church, are experiencing a mass exodus of people converting to Evangelical churches. The loose structure of these Evangelical churches allows virtually anyone who can read a bible to become a preacher.

Evangelicalism as a conservative strand of Christianity was weaponized by Washington to ensure Brazilians and other Latin Americans become fundamental believers in American culture and free enterprise. More dangerously for the working class however, their variant of evangelicalism promotes individual salvation through material wealth and normalizes the outcomes of American neo-liberal economics.

### **Weaponization of Evangelicalism against the Latin American Left**

Since the end of the 19th century, Latin America had been seen by Washington as its 'Western Hemisphere.' As the global struggle between capitalism and communism during the Cold War intensified in the 1970s, especially after American imperialism's defeat in Vietnam, mass social and armed struggles against American-sponsored regimes arose in Central America, and more broadly throughout Latin America. In the context of these struggles, one response of the Catholic Church was Liberation Theology. Liberation theology was an amalgam of Catholic social justice doctrine and a socialist analysis of impoverished and exploited peoples of the Third World (Aman, 1984-85: 427-438). It was seen by Washington as an ideological threat to American domination of its 'Western Hemisphere.' Liberation theology became a motivating force in the struggle for social and economic liberation. Washington viewed the power of liberation theology as an accomplice of Marx-

ist revolution in Latin America. To meet this challenge to American hegemony in Latin America, Washington turned to the Evangelical churches of America.

A 1969 memorandum sent to US President Richard Nixon, from his Vice-President Nelson Rockefeller, a Baptist, stated, “the Catholic church [in Latin America] has ceased to be an ally in whom the US can have confidence” (Elvy, 1987: 98). Rockefeller’s strategy to counter the supposed Marxism of the Catholic church’s Liberation Theology was to send Protestant missionaries into Latin America.

The use of religious leaders and groups was not a new method for Washington to impose its hegemony across the globe, such as the Catholic church’s endorsement of the 1964 Brazilian military coup and the organization of the mujahideen in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 (Krischke, 2007: 403-427; Coll, 2005). The Watergate scandal involving President Nixon led to the formation by the US Senate of the Church Committee, chaired by Senator Frank Church (U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 1976). The Church Committee attempted to examine the operations and activities of the CIA, mainly because it was caught spying on US citizens (Ibid). The Church Committee report released in 1975 revealed that religious leaders and groups were used by the CIA to undermine the Catholic church in Latin America, but did not get into deep detail as could be expected. It stated,

The number of American clergy or missionaries used by the CIA has been small. The CIA has informed the Committee of a total of 14 covert arrangements which involved direct operational use of 21 individuals... In six or seven cases, the CIA paid salaries, bonuses, or expenses to the religious personnel, or helped to fund projects run by them. Most of the individuals were used for covert action purposes. Several were involved in large covert action projects of the mid-Sixties, which were directed at “competing” with communism in the Third World (Internet Archive – US Government, 1976).

However, a study by Eric Draitser showed that the “small number” of 21 operatives provided by the CIA were listed as only of “direct operational use.” Draitser (2014) argues that the report overlooked the “many [operatives] who may have interacted with the agency through proxies and other third parties, as well as those who, through various front operations, may have not even known that they were working for the agency.” He explains that since the report’s release in 1975, “the scope and breadth of US covert actions has grown dramatically, encompassing nearly every political, economic, social, technological and cultural sphere” (Ibid). Draitser concludes that the 1975 report “deals exclusively with the CIA. It does not include other intelligence agencies and their various offshoots including the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), State Department with its attendant National Endowment for Democracy (NED), US

Agency for International Development (USAID) and many more” (Ibid). Gerard Colby and Charlotte Den-net in their book *Thy Will Be Done: The Conquest of the Amazon: Nelson Rockefeller and Evangelism in the Age of Oil* (1995), explain that Rockefeller used American Evangelical missionaries, and in particular, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, to conduct surveys, transport CIA agents and indirectly assist in the genocide of indigenous tribes in the Amazon basin to serve US corporate interests.

The Rockefeller-supported missionaries' first major religious conversion success occurred in Guatemala when the general and dictator José Efraín Ríos Montt became a Pentecostal church member (Gunson, 2018). Montt used Guatemalan television and radio stations to broadcast the Pentecostal doctrine and denounce the mythical collaboration between the Catholic church and Marxism (Severo, 2018).

In the article, “The First Religious War of the 21st Century,” Mike Rivage-Seul argued that “The Rockefeller Report of 1969 already identified liberation theology as a threat to the national security of the United States... The [Reagan] administration heeded the advice, and responded both militarily and ideologically” (Rivage-Seul, 2012). He added, that “As for Reagan’s ideological response to liberation theology.... On his accession to power, CIA spy-ops began funding conservative alternatives to liberation theology in Latin America and in the

US so did business concerns that saw the leftward drift of Latin America as a threat to their presence there” (Ibid). With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, efforts to Evangelize Latin America were mostly abandoned and the weaponized Evangelicals are now used to justify war in the Middle East, especially against Iran (Borger, 2019).

The Evangelical theology claims that poverty and drug and alcohol addiction are personal and spiritual failings. In this respect, according to neoliberal dogma, poverty is a symptom of personal failure and not the consequences of the economic system. Many Evangelical churches, like neoliberalism, aggressively oppose government funding to assist the poor. Evangelical theology is congruent with the ideas of neoliberalism and has served as a sort of Trojan horse for its entry into Latin American society through US intelligence agencies, as already explored. Neoliberalism has relied on Evangelicalism to alter Latin American culture and political economy to become more subservient to US ideological hegemony. The entire operation to Evangelize Latin America, spearheaded by the CIA, was to create a culture shift that would undermine the Left-leaning Catholic church and its influence on Latin American people into accepting the free market and US corporate domination.

### **Evangelical impacts on Brazilian society**

The rise of Evangelicalism has significantly impacted Brazilian social life with the tide of conservatism that it

brought to Latin America's largest state. It has brought social and moral issues such as abortion and homosexuality to the forefront of Brazil's political national agenda at the expense of more important political and economic reforms such as taxation and welfare.

Evangelical church services bring charismatic preaching, as well expressive prayer and singing, which are often absent in the liturgical and symbolically rich Catholic church. Whereas the Catholic church remains traditional in its proselytization, Evangelical churches has successfully engaged Brazilian youth, particularly through social media. With smartphones becoming increasingly popular and widespread across Brazil, this has meant that social media platforms, accessible in seconds with smartphones, allow the young access to new information and be engaged through new methods (Kath and Knijnik, 2015: 873). Non-gospel music, such as Brazilian funk, afro-reggae and rock, but with Christian lyrics, is also played in some Evangelical churches as a means to attract the youth. Through engagement with this music, the young become evangelised, and are influenced by the church in shaping their social and political views.

As a stratum of petty-bourgeois youth in Brazil's southeastern centres of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, they have become increasingly attracted to the politics of identity (Tisdall, 2018). The Evangelical churches provide a defence of traditional conservative Christian values. Pastor Everaldo in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, stated that: "We defend life of the human being since

its conception. We defend the Brazilian family. We defend this clearly: marriage is between a man and woman” (Garcia-Navarro, 2014). Homosexual marriage was legalised in Brazil following a Supreme Court decision of May 2013. Evangelicals have mounted a political campaign to reverse this court decision (Boadle, 2018). Jean Wyllys, a homosexual activist affiliated with the Socialism and Liberty Party and a former member of Brazil’s parliament, stated that: “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” (Oualalou, 2014). Some Evangelicals want a new law in which homosexuality is to be ‘treated’ as a psychological problem (Feder, 2015). The Evangelicals’ anti-homosexual campaign may have a major impact on Brazilian youth to not only oppose the gay marriage law but have it replaced by Evangelical-inspired legislation which outlaws’ homosexuality and treats it as a medical or psychological disorder (Ibid). Thus increasing numbers of Brazilians are being influenced by the message of Evangelical pastors and are gravitating towards conservatism, including the poor and working class (Datafolha, 2017).

This is compounded by the Brazilian Left’s turn to the contemporary western liberal norms. The Brazilian working class do not identify with modern Western identity political issues such as the normalization of transgenderism, the normalization of trans-species, etc. (Singal, 2017). The Brazilian workers and the poorest

elements of society are ignored by the petty-bourgeois Left of southeast Brazil who campaign on these aforementioned social issues, and abandoned class politics. This has created a conservative reaction which promises to provide jobs and opportunities for the poorest people in Brazil. The Catholic church as a social institution has also effectively ended its mission to uplift the poor. Hervé Théry of the University of São Paulo states that: “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” (Ibid). This is an admission the National Catholic Reporter had to make (Allen Jr., 2013). The communal aspect of Evangelicalism fills a social void that the state, Brazilian Left and Catholic Church have failed to address. By filling this void, the Evangelical churches have galvanized their followers to support discriminatory policies which are contrary to their class interests.

The favelas of Brazil are massive and permanent squatter settlements inhabited by those forgotten by the Brazilian state and often denied access to healthcare, education, sanitation, transportation or property rights of other Brazilians. The Catholic Church in Brazil was never prepared for this massive influx of the rural poor into the favelas. Millions of rural Brazilians migrated to the cities throughout the 20th century for economic opportunities and metropolitan areas were unable to

provide these new rural migrants with work, housing, food or other essential social services. On the outskirts of many Brazilian cities, these rural migrants established their own makeshift permanent communities in favelas (Eakin, 2017: 91). Life in the favelas was hard, desperate and unpredictable. The urban poor of the favelas became Brazil's underclass. "The government doesn't help us, so God is the only option for the poor," Evangelical Pastor Antonio, a former drug dealer, explained (Arsenault, 2017).

The Evangelical churches claim to help those in the favelas fight against poverty, unemployment, crime, mental health, while also providing education and economic development (Ibid). It is for this reason that the political landscape in Brazil is changing as the poor communities shift to the Right spectrum of politics as the Left have abandoned the class struggle for identity politics and "the Catholics have shown themselves to be incapable," according to Cesar Romero Jacob of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (Oualalou, 2014).

Sometimes these social changes include fundamentalism with violence against non-believers, which is becoming increasingly common in Rio de Janeiro's favelas. The *Bandidos Evangélicos* (Evangelical Bandits), are born-again Evangelical gangsters from the favelas, who have started a campaign of violence against believers of Umbanda and Candomblé, a religion that fuses Catholicism with African spiritual beliefs. Robert Muggah, research

director of the Igarapé Institute in Rio, explained that “The latest wave of religious-inspired violence can be traced to the turn toward evangelicalism in many parts of Rio de Janeiro, especially low-income settings such as favelas” (Schipani and Leahy, 2017). The large numbers of criminals converting to Evangelicalism have emerged as a body of frontline spiritual soldiers ready to enforce the sect’s religious code within the favelas. Their Evangelical zeal may change the fabric of social life in the favelas. Brazil’s famous favelas are the home to a unique cultural aspect and where many of Brazil’s famous dances, Brazilian funk and afro-reggae music, and arts originated (Resende, Souza and Costa, 2011: 136). How the conservative Evangelical church will affect these unique aspects of Brazilian culture is unknown.

However, the Evangelical churches have attempted to improve social life in the favelas. Evangelical churches have provided basic services such as employment assistance and education to those living in the favelas (Arsenault, 2017). Because of their social interventions in the favelas and the Left’s neglect to the needs of the poor, many in the favelas have turned to the Evangelical churches as their saviours.

Many Brazilians feel that their lives have worsened since the ascendancy of neoliberalism in the economy and the moral decline of the Catholic church which is continuously caught up in sex and paedophilia scandals in Latin America (Malzac, 2019). In this context of social and

moral decay, the Evangelical churches offer the certainties of traditional values, the preservation of the family unit and a strong adherence to the literal Bible. However, Rogerio Baptistini of Mackenzie Presbyterian University argues that:

The growth in evangelical Christianity is taking place without a deep discussion of the values enshrined in our historical character. We are an open and tolerant society, but this sudden growth threatens rationality, the denial of the other, the diverse, the different (Schweimler, 2016).

Baptistini is referring to the Evangelical churches anti-gay stance: and, in the context of Rio de Janeiro's favelas, the killings and beatings of those practising Umbanda and Candomblé. He presents a strong case that the Evangelical church threatens the diversity and difference within Brazilian society. At the political level, the decline of the Left and the resurgence of conservatism is spearheaded by both neoliberal economic forces, and the rapid expansion of the Evangelical churches. The changes in Brazilian society and social life correspond to the changes in its politics.

### **The Evangelical Church in Brazil: A Business to Exploit the Poor?**

The lack of central authority with Evangelical church allows charismatic and engaging individuals with little

knowledge of the bible and no theological training to become preachers who open their own churches, which allows for the church's rapid expansion. Their followers are some of Brazil's poorest people whose generosity and faith they exploit for their own worldly gain, as will be demonstrated.

Pentecostalism is the dominant tendency of the Evangelical churches in Brazil. Its central tenet is that an active presence of God remains in the world and that people, just like Jesus, Peter and Paul, can access this divine power and speak in tongues, banish addictions and heal the sick, and in extreme cases, resurrect the dead (Nzwili, 2019). Armed with the belief in divine intervention and their connection to divine power, Evangelical preachers promise significant material wealth to their poor believers. Evangelical churches offer the slogan "stop suffering," as only faith in God will make you rich, bringing hope to poor Brazilians (Ubags, 2015). This is the basis of the Evangelical prosperity theology.

The prosperity gospel promises the believer that by giving money to their church, praying and adhering to strict social rules such as not drinking alcohol, smoking and having sex outside of marriage, a structured life is created and material rewards will result. Paul Freston, a sociologist and an expert in Pentecostalism in Latin America, stated that: "You learn to see yourself as an agent who has possibilities, who has the ability with God's help to achieve things, to get control of yourself. It doesn't

mean you become rich, but it often means you rise from absolute destitution to dignified poverty” (Bailey, 2017). Although the original Protestant movement in 16th century Catholic Europe arose from Martin Luther’s condemnation of the Vatican’s power and corruption, the Evangelical promise of personal wealth by donating to its Brazilian churches bears a striking resemblance to the medieval Catholic Church’s sale of ‘indulgences’ for the forgiveness of sins.

A 2013 Forbes report found that prominent Evangelical preachers who advocated the prosperity theology were the richest pastors in Brazil (Antunes, 2013). The report listed Edir Macedo, the founder and leader of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, and at the time of the report, having a net worth \$950 million (Ibid). Macedo, the author of books criticising Catholicism and Afro-Brazilian religions owned Brazil’s second largest broadcaster, Rede Record; the Folha Universal newspaper; Record News channel; music label companies; several properties; and, a \$45 million jet. The funds for these commodities were from the donations made to his church. Macedo is alleged to have siphoned billions of dollars of donations projected for charity; and, has had charges of fraud and money laundering levelled against him (Ibid). Other leading Evangelical preachers are Valdemiro Santiago whose estimated wealth is \$220 million; followed by Silas Malafaia with \$150 million; Romildo Ribeiro Soares, owning \$125 million; and, Es-

tevam Hernandes Filho and his wife Sonia sharing \$65 million (Ibid).

Contemporary Brazil is in economic recession, with unemployment at 13% in 2017 and the extreme poverty level at 4.3% and overall poverty at 25% recorded in 2015 (Cascione, 2017). The promise of individual salvation and wealth by donating to the Evangelical church resonates deeply with the poorest in Brazilian society (The World Bank, 2017). A Washington Post report quoted Gabriel Camargo, a Pentecostal pastor with the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, declaring “God will bless you if you give a lot more to the church. You’ll have so much money,” and providing for individual donations through a credit card payment (Bailey, 2017).

Apart from the promise of great material wealth for donating to the church, some Evangelical churches feature charismatic child preachers. Evangelical Pastor Walter Luz estimates there are thousands (Shapiro, 2015). These children implore congregations to make donations to the church, promote the sale of DVD’s of their sermons, CD’s of their music and undertake long preaching tours around the world to promote their brand (Ibid). The engagement of charismatic children to promote their spiritual message indicates the commercial purpose of these Evangelical churches where theological study and training are not required of their evangelists.

Although only a minority of the plenitude of Evangelical churches engage in this practice, those which do have turned their churches into billion-dollar businesses and command most Evangelical believers (Antunes, 2013). In contrast, many Evangelical preachers are poor like their followers and hope to make money by opening commercialized churches. Beginning in 2000, as many as 40 new Evangelical churches opened weekly in Rio de Janeiro, according to Roberto Inacio, director of an Assemblies of God Bible institute in Rio (The Gospel Herald, 2003). It is not uncommon in Brazil, such as Vitória in Espírito Santo, to see two Evangelical churches directly next to or opposite each other. This would indicate that with these churches in close proximity to each other, business promotion rather than preaching the word of God is their principal objective.

The immediate material reward in the present life that some Evangelical churches promise, rather than the spiritual afterlife as the Catholic faith offers, is the illusion which draws impoverished Brazilians into the Evangelical fold. Nevertheless, the attractions of consumerism took hold in the favelas. It proved to be the ideal social setting for the message of the Evangelical churches which promised the poor a way to escape from their oppression after their traditional values had failed. Evangelicalism offered them individual salvation and a consumerist lifestyle which would be blessed by God.

The Evangelical leaders through their prosperity theology found true believers in the poor of Brazil.

Leading Pentecostals in the US are critical of the prosperity doctrine promoted by some Evangelicals (Coleman, 2000: 27). In 1980, the General Council of the Assemblies of God stated that prosperity theology overlooked the importance of prayer as the method for requests to God and not simply positive confession (General Council of the Assemblies of God, 1980: 5). They concluded that the doctrine only appealed to those in developing states (General Council of the Assemblies of God, 1980: 8). This Pentecostal criticism of the prosperity gospel was made a decade before the tide of Evangelicalism had reached Brazil. Since the 1990s the growth of the Evangelical church has exploded in Brazil, particularly among the impoverished (Pew Research Center, 2013). Whereas in the US Evangelicalism was largely a middle-class social phenomenon, in Brazil the majority of its adherents are poor.

### **Evangelicalism in Brazilian Politics**

Electoral politicians who uphold conservative values against abortion and homosexuality are increasingly aligned with the Evangelical churches which ideologically support them (Bohn 2004, 2007). This electoral trend was demonstrated in the second-round presidential elections of 2002 with Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), with

his re-election in 2006 (Ibid) and in the successive victories of Dilma Rousseff (Alessi, 2016), and the election of Bolsonaro to the presidency in 2018. This growing trend demonstrates the influence of Evangelicalism in the electoral successes of the Workers Party (PT) and was symbolized by the presence of Rousseff at the inauguration of the “Temple of Solomon” of the Evangelical Universal Church of the Kingdom of God – in the presence of its religious leader Edir Macedo in 2014 (Sobrinho, 2014; Watts, 2014). Prior to this event, Marcelo Crivella, the mayor of Rio de Janeiro and an Evangelical bishop, was appointed Minister of Fisheries, by Rousseff in 2012 (Boadle, 2013).

The PT’s social policies had an initial affinity with elements of the Evangelical doctrine. The PT attempted to address the needs of the faithful and the poor who in the absence of state action sought solutions to the problems of income, employment, education, health and family stability (Bohn, 2004; Potter et al., 2014). However, the Evangelicals withdrew their political support for any political representative charged with corruption and dishonesty and when the anti-corruption operations against targeted politicians began, the Evangelicals withdrew their support for leading corrupt PT politicians.

The investigations into the corruption of leading political figures led to a crisis of legitimacy in the Brazilian State. In response to these revelations of high corrup-

tion, the Evangelicals have mobilized politically with Mario Crivella elected as the mayor of Rio de Janeiro. His mayoral victory represents not only a political consolidation of Evangelicals, in the legislative branch, but also in executive power. In the context of this legitimacy crisis, the Evangelicals, have benefitted politically as there is a popular rejection of traditional political class from the Left and the Right, as well as secular representation itself. (Janoni, 2016).

In this sense, what is observed is the consolidation of a vacuum of power that was affected by the evident absence of political options, precipitated by the moderate Left's involvement in institutionalised corruption. This affected its own legitimacy and led to the subsequent takeover of this empty political space by those who supposedly express interest in a population already abandoned by the state.

It can be argued that there is the weight and responsibility of the moderate Left, where it showed a political accommodation with the Evangelicals, whose potential for political mobilization could change Brazilian elections (Bohn, 2007). Political Evangelicalism may even find an affinity with Catholics in a supra-religious and non-liberal agenda, directed towards an economic statism linked to anti-abortion and anti-homosexual moral agenda (Bohn, 2004).

In Brazilian national policy, Crivella may represent the reflection of an Evangelical beginning. Evangelicals by their religious agenda in politics, allow the fall of a mask and reveal the true face of a national mentality, which qualifies as difficult to accept institutional and social changes. And the true face is Christian moralism, which is presently beyond the scope of individual religious beliefs, and expresses a notion of society that has not yet allowed itself to reflect clearly on its values. The inclusion of Evangelicals in the political agenda, in this sense, opens an opportunity for reflection.

Moreover, Crivella's election also reflects a natural tendency of representativeness and legitimacy at the appropriate time from a significant population niche that until then had been abandoned by the state and by the social patterns of the Left and the traditional creeds - not to mention the decadence of legitimacy in the absence of identity of the last governments that sought a relative approximation.

The reflection of this is the approximation of the population in another social meander, not only in religion, but also in the intricacies of the bureaucratic apparatuses of the State. Opportunities for the Evangelical population are reflected, no longer in the close nuclei of each citizen, but in the generic scope of broader applications of possible public policies. And the induction is not because of the specific condition of the Evangelical

churches, but with the significant role of the Left, by the acceptance of the Evangelical vote and subsequent participation in their governments, as well as by the moralistic reinforcement of Catholicism and other creeds of traditional conservatism.

### **President Bolsonaro: Brazil's Evangelical Champion**

Bolsonaro, an ultra-conservative former military officer-turned-politician, capitalized on the fall of the PT. With 54% of Brazilians holding a conservative view according to a 2016 survey (Almeida, 2017), the continued Liberal Left attack on traditional values saw voters turn to Bolsonaro as their defender. Out of all of Brazil's Christian sects, the Evangelicals were the most ardent supporters of Bolsonaro with nearly 70% of them voting for him (Machado, 2018).

His denominational allegiance remains a mystery in Brazil. He was born a Catholic and has never renounced Catholicism but he was videoed being baptized in the Jordan River by Pastor Everaldo - a prominent leader of the Assembly of God and the head of the Christian Social Party who also ran for President in 2014 - in May 2016 (Smith and Lloyd, 2018). This symbolic act coupled with his ultra-conservatism, was enough for Bolsonaro to garner the overwhelming support from this powerful minority bloc. Whether he identifies as Evangelical, or

made the move to gain a powerful minority vote, his presidential election demonstrates a significant political-cultural shift in Brazil. In the fourteen years before Bolsonaro's presidency, Brazil was governed by a progressive Leftist party which supported identity politics and continually challenged the natural Christian conservatism of the country (Lero and Bello, 2015).

To galvanize the political support of the Evangelicals, Bolsonaro promised to move the Brazilian Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He made it one of his main policy goals by continually mentioning this on the presidential election campaign trail (The Guardian, 2019). Brazilian Evangelicals were elated by this Bolsonaro promise. The Evangelicals believe that there will be a future golden age when Jesus Christ returns to reign on Earth. Before Christ's return there would be a time of tribulation where Christ defeats evil; only after natural disasters, wars and the Antichrist devastate the world (Illing, 2018). After these tribulations, the Evangelicals believe that the people of the Mosaic covenant, including the Jews who will convert to Christianity, will bring forth the golden age (Ibid). Evangelicals hold the belief that when the Jewish people reclaim the Holy Land, that the world will move closer to the second coming of Christ. Evangelicals have been described as Christian Zionists, as they have supported the expansionist drive of the state of Israel in the Palestinian Occupied Territories and the annexed Golan Heights region of Syria.

For Christian Zionists, these actions represent the Jewish reclamation of the Holy Land.

One of Bolsonaro's first statements after becoming President-Elect was to announce the relocation of Brazil's embassy in Israel, "As previously stated during our campaign, we intend to transfer the Brazilian Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Israel is a sovereign state and we shall duly respect that." The Bolsonaro announcement followed US President Donald Trump's decision to move the American embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In a later statement, Bolsonaro threatened to close the Palestinian Embassy in the Brazilian capital, saying: "Is Palestine a country? Palestine is not a country, so there should be no embassy here," and "We do not negotiate with terrorists" (Donati, 2018). These statements were immediately endorsed by Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (Zion, 2019). Bolsonaro refuted Brazil's long-standing neutrality on the question of Palestine.

The Brazilian embassy move has not happened as many within Bolsonaro's party, including Vice President Hamilton Mourão, as well as the powerful Agricultural Ministry, opposed the move, arguing that it would significantly harm trade relations with Arab countries (Antonopoulos, 2019). Their opposition was announced after Arab states threatened to stop Brazilian imports if the embassy was relocated to Jerusalem. In 2017, Brazil had a \$419

million trade deficit with Israel compared to a \$7.1 billion surplus with the 22 states of the Arab League – accounting for 10% of Brazil's total trade surplus (Douglas and Freitas, 2018).

Although Bolsonaro was unsuccessful in moving the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, he found great success in presenting himself as a defender of social conservatism. With Evangelicals taking a strong position over issues of life, family, sexuality, gender roles and faith, they believe Bolsonaro will mobilize Brazilians to defend their faith and moral values. As the majority of Brazilians claim to hold conservative values, Bolsonaro has mobilized communities around moral and social issues. Bolsonaro has brought religion and morality to the forefront of Brazil's political and public life, something that was especially lacking under the PT government.

Bolsonaro's verbal attacks against ethnic minorities, homosexuals and Marxists, highlights the insecurities of Evangelicals who felt threatened by the liberal political and social order that emerged under the PT government. Bolsonaro's alignment to the Evangelical vision has meant that specific religious factors dominate Brazilian domestic and foreign policy in what has been historically an exemplary secular state (Winter, 2019). Although Bolsonaro has not renounced Catholicism, his wife and children are Evangelical, and his strong endorsement of Israel has confirmed him as an Evangelical political champion.

## Conclusion

The explosive growth of Evangelicalism in Brazil is unprecedented and not evident anywhere else in the world. Evangelicalism is predicted to be the majority religion in Brazil by 2030 and will become a political and social juggernaut (Hennigan, 2013). Evangelical adherents collectively can influence politicians and use broadcast and social media, to promote their conservative values. After Catholicism was forced upon the people of Latin America by the Iberian colonists, it had faced no threat to its religious dominance until the rapid advance of contemporary Evangelicalism.

The Evangelical leadership has successfully changed the lives of millions of Brazilians by influencing the ways they dress, what they eat, the music they listen to, and the candidates they vote for in elections. Evangelicals are encouraged to vote only for Evangelical candidates. As they are projected to become the religious and political majority, it can only be expected that the world's first openly Pentecostal or Neo-Pentecostal president will be in Brazil. Bolsonaro has not renounced his Catholicism and was only recently baptized by an Assembly of God pastor.

The Evangelical influence will be felt in society if it successfully dominates Brazilian politics. The recent changes in Brazilian society, the legalization of same

sex marriage, the debate over the decriminalization of drugs, safe-sex education in schools and the distribution of clean and unused needles to drug addicts, will be challenged or reversed by the rising tide of Evangelical conservatism under the Bolsonaro administration. The most direct issue that the Evangelical church must resolve is its loose structure where some of its ministries allow children and people with no theological training to preach and/or open their own churches. Although this in itself is not necessarily bad, the exploitation of children must be closely monitored.

More importantly, the loose structure must be consolidated so that churches that preach prosperity theology can be closed and exposed for their false doctrine interpretations. This remains one of the most immediate issues to the Evangelical church brand in Brazil and the source for one of its greatest criticisms, despite the attraction it has to the poor. The social assistance carried out by the Evangelical church for Brazil's impoverished, particularly in the favelas, has a specific political purpose: to win followers to its doctrine and program. In the favelas, the Evangelical church relies on its petty criminal foot soldiers to attack the followers of Afro-Brazilian religions.

What is certain however is that with the rise of the Evangelical church, it is inevitable that it will become a social and political force in Brazil. How Brazilian soci-

ety integrates this phenomenon in its entirety cannot be predicted. In the short term, under the Bolsonaro presidency, the Evangelical church will continue to deepen its influence over Brazilians and convert its mass following among the poor towards conservatism.

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