

LAITY AND SECULARISM IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN PLURALISM¹

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the postulates that guided Republican laity and Catholic secularism processes until the first half of the twentieth century and their current transformation under the impact of the intensification of religious diversity and their renewed public presence. We sought to demonstrate that, despite measures to establish a lay Brazilian state since the beginning of the Republican regime, the Catholic religion and, more recently, religions in general have not entirely lost their moral-political influence.

KEYWORDS: *Brazilian religious field; pluralism, Catholic Church, evangelical religions, secularism*

Laicidade e secularismo no pluralismo brasileiro contemporâneo

RESUMO

Este artigo visa caracterizar os padrões que regulavam a laicidade republicana e o secularismo católico no Brasil até a segunda metade do século XX e suas transformações atuais sob o impacto do pluralismo. Procuraremos demonstrar que, apesar de medidas laicizantes do Estado brasileiro ao longo da sua história, a religião católica e, mais recentemente, a religião em geral não perderam completamente seu poder de influência político-moral e que as tensões implicadas na expansão do pluralismo mais contemporaneamente não desalojaram o religioso do espaço social construído como secular.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Campo religioso brasileiro, pluralismo, Igreja Católica, religiões evangélicas, secularismo*

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INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, the literature about the Brazilian religious field stressed the significant changes that definitively altered its configuration (Sanchis, 1997; Pierucci; Prandi, 1996, 2004; Novaes, 2002; Camurça, 2006; Mafra, 2013; Mariano, 2001, 2010). Until the mid-1980s Brazil was considered as “the world’s largest Catholic country”. In fact, by observing census data regarding religious affiliations in Brazil through 2010, we see that until the 1940s the vast majority of Brazilians declared themselves Catholic (95.2%

of the population). However, since the 1950s, the demographic hegemony of Catholicism began to change. Gradually, at first. In the 1980s, Catholics still represented 89.0% of the population, yet, since then, this percentage declined more intensely, reaching about 73.9% of the population in the early 2000s. In two decades, the Catholic Church in Brazil lost nearly $\frac{1}{4}$ of its declared adherents, and by the 2010 Census, only 64.63% of Brazilians declared Catholicism as their religion. Although this percentage is still quite high, representing about 120 million people, there has been a remarkable drop in the portion of the population that declares itself Catholic.

This decline of the Catholic community is not only a Brazilian phenomenon. It has been seen in many countries with Catholic traditions in Latin America,² and especially in Europe, as highlighted in the book *Portraits du catholicisme*, a collective work by researchers from five Catholic European countries—Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium, and Italy—under the direction of Alfonso Pérez-Agote (2012). The book presents a detailed portrait of Catholicism in each of these countries, identifying a pattern typical to all of them: the decrease, in different degrees of intensity, of the rates of adherence to Catholicism. Although religious practices declined in all of those countries, in Portugal and Italy there has been a more recent and weaker trend than in the others. Portugal is the European country with the highest percentage of Catholics, with nearly 85% of the population declaring itself Catholic in 2001.

Parallel to the decrease of practitioners of Catholicism, the authors noted growth in the percentage of people who declare themselves non-religious. This phenomenon also began to be examined in Brazilian studies. In Brazil, this contingent jumped from 0.2% in 1940 to 8.4% of the population in 2010. That is, while Catholics have decreased 22.3%, those who declared themselves “without religion” increased 3,700%. This change is dramatic but similar to that observed in European countries with a Catholic tradition. Perhaps the only change that is more distinctive in the Brazilian religious configuration is the sharp expansion of the population who declared themselves to be evangelical. In the 1940 Census, Protestants represented only 2.6% of the Brazilian population, but by the turn of the century they reached 15.5% of the population, and in the 2010 census, the striking level of 22.16%, a growth of more than 500%. Remarkably, the evangelical expansion is the census variable that showed the greatest transformation between 1991 and 2000—more than marriage, fertility, housing, occupation, income, and access to consumer goods.

However, the multiple religious belongings of the Brazilian population and the various changes in the classificatory structure of religions in the censuses during the twentieth century have pre-

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[2] According to data from the Latinobarómetro Corporation, between 1995 and 2017, the Catholic population of 18 Latin American countries declined from 80% in 1995 to 59% in 2017. The only country where Catholicism strengthened in the same period was Mexico. Uruguay stands out not only as the second least Catholic country in the region (38%), behind only Honduras (37%), but also as the country with the highest rate of atheists, agnostics, and those declared without religion.

vented a more precise description of Brazil's contemporary religious profile. Even so, the decrease of Catholics in the past 50 years, and the expansion of Protestants, especially pentecostal evangelicals, and the nonreligious, is a tangible fact. The data indicates that the Brazilian religious field has become more plural, although still predominantly Christian. Other religions, although numerous, jointly represent only 5% of the population. However, the significant growth of the nonreligious, which since the 1990s became the third largest segment in the country, indeed introduced a new element in the configuration of Brazilian secularism. Although these numbers are currently well known and widely commented, this article offers a large depiction and analysis of the impacts and political tensions raised by these recent transformations in the religious configuration in Brazil.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LAITY AND SECULARISM IN BRAZIL

In his 1991 lecture at the *École Pratiques des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, Jean Baubérot suggested, for heuristic purposes, distinguishing processes of laity from those of secularization. For Baubérot, while a process of laity would be associated with interventions by the state apparatus to resolve tensions or explicit conflicts between different social forces (religious, cultural, political, military), secularization would correspond to a loss of social belonging of the religious. Much has been written about these concepts (Casanova, 1994; Connolly, 1999, 2011; Calhoun *et al.*, 2011). We have addressed the issue in previous studies (Montero, 2011; 2016; 2018). Therefore, we do not intend to conduct a critical reflection on these concepts but to characterize these processes in Brazil, considering the changes in the configuration of the religious field mentioned above.

For this analysis, we will consider a “laity process” to involve the social-political dynamics of separation between the institutional structures of the state and the Catholic Church and the consequential regulation of religious prerogatives. The concept of “secularization” will be used to refer to the social, political, and symbolic processes that give structure to a civil society that perceives itself as autonomous from the state and religion. We seek to demonstrate that these two processes did not develop at the same pace. Despite the legal measures historically taken to increase the laity of the Brazilian state, the Catholic religion, and, more recently, religion in general, did not wholly lose their moral-political influence. Besides, we argue that while the tensions implied in the more contemporaneous expansion of pluralism have changed attitudes concerning beliefs and religious institutions, they have not removed the religious from the secular social space.

1. Legality

The Brazilian Constitution of 1824 established, in its article 5, Catholicism as the religion of the Empire. Despite ulterior state tolerance towards the Protestant cults celebrated by the German immigrants, the emergence of a pluralist culture was still not on the horizon. In the first national census of 1872, in the religious category there were only two options: Catholic and not-Catholic. This agreement with the Catholic Church ended in 1888, when the Republican regime adopted the principle of separation between the state and the Catholic Church. Education was declared to be a lay field; baptism and ecclesiastical marriages no longer had legal civil standing; cemeteries came under the control of the state; and, simultaneously, legislative measures incorporated the principles of religious liberty and religious equality.

The legal separation of the state from the Catholic Church radically changed its social and political position, requiring a new definition of the relations between state and religion. In general terms, the ecclesiastic hierarchy opposed this legal separation with the state. Nevertheless, some new republican concepts, such as “religious liberty”, earned its support, and, according to Giumbelli (2008), were phrased under its inspiration.

In the first Republican Constitution of 1891, this principle was written as follows: “All individuals and religious beliefs can worship publicly, associate together for this purpose and purchase goods, observing the dispositions of the common law”. The first Civil Code of 1917 reaffirmed the same notion. The idea of “religion” presented in this Code refers virtually exclusively to the Catholic Church and ecclesial Catholicism, whose “religious” status left no margin for doubts. An analysis of how the official texts concerning religious regulation were written reveals that Catholicism served as a tacit reference for the legal definition of what would be considered a religion. Laws do not mention which religion would have liberty, but regulated the liberty that religion, in this case, Catholicism, would have (Giumbelli, 2002, p. 276). In the first decades of the republican regime, the Catholic ecclesiastic leadership’s first concern was to guarantee the preservation of its property and civil prerogatives. Thus, “religious liberty” did not mean, during the first half of the nineteenth century, respect for “freedom of conscious” which would imply, according to Baubérat (2013), a guarantee of free-thinking even if opposed to religion, or “freedom of belief,” understood as tolerance for the exercise of worship by minority non-Christian religions (which had still not been conceived as such). Above all, it involved the guarantee of neutrality of the state concerning religion, that is, the certitude that the public actions of the Catholic Church would not be limited. During this period, non-Christian movements such as Allan Kardec’s spiritism and Afro-

Brazilian practices were struggling to be declared religious cults and to be able to enjoy the “religious liberty” established in the 1917 Civil Code, as Emerson Giumbelli (2002) demonstrated.

The Catholic ecclesiastic elites were quite successful in imposing their political positions. In the first years of the Republican regime, despite the legal separation, the intervention of the Catholic Church in issues of national public interest, such as the civil and criminal codes, was notable. The Church’s political hegemony continued for nearly the entire twentieth century.

The tensions between the Catholic influence and other social spheres that sought autonomy—particularly the fields of law, medicine, and public education—surfaced since the first decades of the Republic. Even so, as we will see, until very recently, the Catholic hegemony allowed the Church to speak legitimately in the name of the nation and the civil society. The decline of this hegemony followed the emergence of new actors in civil society, and the increasingly more evident expansion of religion and moral pluralism since the 1980s. The emergence of new voices and different interests progressively made these ecclesiastical interventions the object of questioning and public controversies.

2. Social and political secularism

As the work of Montero (2006) shows well, the increased laity of the Brazilian state and the secularization of society have to be considered two distinct processes that do not necessarily coincide. Despite having lost many of its traditional prerogatives for the control of the population, the Catholic Church, in the very process of reconstructing its institutional autonomy from the state, remained very active as a voice of civil society. In this sense, “the radical subtraction of broad sectors of civil society from its influence or the reflux of religious action in general towards the domestic sphere did not take place” (p.48). On the contrary, the intervention of the Catholic Church in the Brazilian public sphere remained alive during the entire twentieth century.

Its form of action, however, has changed. With the institutional separation from the state came a more distant stance from the political structure. The Catholic Church leadership reorganized itself in the first decades of the twentieth century, seeking to be seen as a political expression of the will of the nation. They did so by promoting religious ceremonies on civic holidays, inaugurating public works, and mobilizing Catholics and political authorities in Catholic liturgical celebrations. During the military regime (1964-1985), it created new institutional organizations and new arrangements of para-diocesan practices of worship that would contribute to the emergence of new political actors and to the construction of Brazilian civil society itself.

a. The Catholic Church and Civil Society

The Catholic Church, as an expression of the nation's soul, is an already well-studied subject and falls beyond the scope of this work to review this well-known topic. Our interest is to focus on a recent period, which began with the emergence of the military dictatorship in 1964 that sparked intense actions by the Church to support the creation of a "culture of rights." Founded in 1952, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (CNBB), which hierarchically is an essential pastoral entity within the Catholic Church, became one of the leading institutions to support the restoration of civil rights and the promotion of human rights during the regime of exception. In this sense, the Church was one of the few institutions capable of giving public voice to the defense of rights in this oppressive political context (Rosado-Nunes, 2008). In order to do so, it created new entities like the Commission for Justice and Peace (1969) and Centers for Defense of Human Rights (1976), and reproduced them at the level of the dioceses. It also disseminated new categories and ideas until then absent in the Brazilian political vocabulary, such as the defense and promotion of human rights, specifically civil rights and individual liberties. Steil and Toniol (2012) have demonstrated that these institutions, although formed within the domain of the dioceses, "established themselves as active entities in the legal, political, and media fields by denouncing human rights violations, protecting political prisoners, and defending victims of the military regime" (p. 78). According to them, an international and Latin American movement collaborated to this development. Documents produced since the Episcopal conferences of Latin America (Celam) held in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) supported and legitimated the Catholic Church's actions in defense of human rights.

The emphasis on human rights as social rights was consistent with some Catholic Liberation Theology concepts, such as the "preferential option for the poor", and the idea of human rights as "dignity for the oppressed." (Relatório final do II Encontro dos Direitos Humanos). In this understanding, social rights were conceived as rights of the poor, while the liberal concept of these rights, born in the liberal revolutions, was rarely mentioned.

Ecclesial actions in support of human rights continued and intensified in the re-democratization period of the 1980s and '90s, primarily through the promotion of human rights as social rights. At the beginning of this period, the Catholic Church worked to incorporate social rights in Brazilian law. The Church also incorporated the concept of rights in its discourses and proposals for pastoral activities and made a substantial investment in structures suited to disseminate Catholic notions of rights through clergy and lay movements.

One example of this effort to propagate these concepts is the annual Fraternity Campaigns organized by the National Bishops Conference, which in this period mostly addressed human rights issues.

An examination of the motives and slogans of these campaigns in the 1980s and '90s reveals a central focus on the promotion of social rights for the Brazilian population, still mostly Catholic. In the 1960s and '70s, the chosen topics were more doctrinaire and pastoral, as shown by the slogans "Remember You Are also the Church" or "Discover the Joy of Serving". In the 1980s, other motifs appeared, such as Health and Fraternity, with the slogan "Health for All" (1981), supporting the right to public healthcare, which only became a universal in Brazil with the Constitution of 1988. Education and Fraternity also turned into a prominent issue with the slogan: "The Truth Will Set you Free" (1982), highlighting the importance of the universalization of the right to education. Fraternity and Land rose with the slogan "God's Land, Land of Brothers" (1986) highlighting the rights to land and the importance of agrarian reform in the country. The Catholic Church, through the Pastoral of Land, was historically involved in the complex agrarian problem in Brazil, and one of the most significant social movements of the time, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) [Landless Workers Movement] had very close relations with representatives of Catholicism in the country since its birth in the 1980s (Vasquez, 2002).

Another topic was Fraternity and Minors, framed with the slogan "Those Who Shelter the Minor, Shelters Me" (1987). It is well-known that the Catholic Church, through the Pastoral of the Child, was one of the main actors in drafting the country's Statute for Children and Adolescents (ECA). This statute is a landmark in the establishment of the rights for children in the country. It defined new and broader rights for children and teenagers, who became subjects of rights and gained an Integral Protection Policy. The Pastoral of the Child supported various elements of the version of the Statute that was approved. The Fraternity Campaign also addressed racial issues, with the slogan "Listen to the Clamor of this People" (1988), regarding the rights of black people.

These campaigns are launched annually by the CNBB, addressing a specific theme every year. The theme and corresponding slogan inspire an official position paper outlined in legal-scientific language. Along with hymns, posters, and prayers, this paper is written to circulate widely throughout the year. All Brazilian parishes repeat them in their yearly liturgical calendar, especially during mass. Through this strategy, the material is broadly disseminated in many directions. Catholics who participate either occasionally or regularly in the rituals engage with these ideas, values, and perceptions.

The analysis of the Fraternity Campaigns gives us a good idea of the significant engagement of the CNBB in the national propaganda of its social rights project. As Steil and Toniol (2012) observed, “the capillarity of Catholicism in the Brazilian society and the centralized structure of the Catholic Church” (p. 78) were essential factors in having these concepts become enrooted in the consciousness and public opinion of the country.

However, the CNBB did not limit its actions to a Catholic audience. It also sought to act directly in civil society, organizing social movements in defense of human rights and, since 1981, coordinating National Human Rights Encounters. In reality, the human rights movements are one of the many examples of social movements born through the action of the Catholic Church, with the support of the Pastoral Commissions and Ecclesiastical Base Communities. Many other major social movements in Brazil founded in that period, such as the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), were also born through and articulated with the Catholic Church.

Although these encounters were presented as lay events, the Catholic Church led their organization. According to Steil and Toniol, “the foci of the encounter maintained the Catholic jargon and presented proposals forged at the heart of the Church, all related to its pastoral activity”. This pattern established an ambiguous approach by the Church towards social movements in which the institutionalization of the human rights policy was based on organizations controlled by the Catholic Church (2012, p. 7). In sum, the birth of a human rights policy in Brazil took place at the heart of the Catholic Church, through its institutions and representatives. Only in the late 1990s did civic human rights organizations gain autonomy from the Catholic Church. It is also essential to emphasize that, although the Catholic Church historically defended civil rights, when this topic more recently became related to sexual and reproductive rights, as well as to issues linked to biotechnology and bioethics, their position shifted to clear and explicit opposition. In this matter, the Brazilian church followed the direction established by the Vatican since the late 1990s. We will return to this issue.

This brief overview illustrates how the Catholic Church, with its strong institutional presence and symbolic strength, occupied a central position in the last century as a regulatory agency of social life, stimulating different forms of mobilization, and collaborating in the construction of civic culture and public morality. The activity of Catholic actors (individuals and collectives) was so consistent with the values circulating in the public spheres of social action that, until very recently, its presence as a political actor was nearly not noticed. Therefore, the naturalization of the action of the Catholic Church that

permeated the fabric of the Brazilian social landscape would offer it an “invisibility effect” (Almeida, 2010).

The social and political changes over the past three decades carried with them the emergence of new actors, prepared to challenge the Catholic Church’s protagonism, such as neo-Pentecostal evangelicals and the non-religious. This new interplay broke the enchantment of Catholic invisibility. The imagined “consensus” of a Catholic nation came to be questioned, as indicated by a series of lawsuits recently filed in the courts that required the Catholic Church to argue and justify its position in various disputes for social influence (Sales, 2014; 2015).

There have been many reasons for the decline of the hegemony of the Catholic Church over the past 50 years. On the political level there has been a complexification and diversification of actors in civil society, with a proliferation of non-governmental organizations that have come to work in collaboration with the state; a reorganization of political parties and parliamentary action; and the incorporation to the state apparatus, in the late 1990s, of human and civil rights agendas. In the legal field, since the enactment of the 1988 Constitution, the concept of human rights has been continuously broadened by the inclusion of new actors in the dispute. New rights, in particular the right to difference, gained space in the national public agenda, and since the 1990s new public policies towards gender, ethnic, and religious equality have been gradually implemented. These public policies concerning diversity began to appear during President Fernando Henrique’s administration (1995-2002) and intensified in the administrations of Presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff (2003-2016).

Although increasingly losing its position as a protagonist, the Catholic Church followed the first movements regarding the incorporation of the pluralist agenda. According to Steil and Toniol, at the V National Human Rights Encounter in 1988, “respect for difference became one of the main causes of the human rights struggle” (2012, p. 76). The CNBB became engaged in defense of the environment, indigenous and traditional populations, and racial issues. Nevertheless, in the late 1990s, when this agenda was being institutionalized as state policy, and in particular when agendas concerning gender and sexual and reproductive rights began to be considered in public policies in 2010, deep cleavages emerged between the perception of the Catholic agencies and other social actors.

In this period, the relationship of Catholic human rights activists with those from other social movements was diverted by these movements’ defense of sexual and reproductive rights. Abortion, the day-after pill, in-vitro fertilization, and other issues, especially those related to the beginning of life and of human reproduction, were in-

corporated as “human rights”. These “new rights” generated tensions and disputes between representatives of Catholicism, such as the National Conference of Bishops, and nonreligious social movements, particularly feminist groups.

In the 2000s, the Catholic Church made numerous attempts to interfere, through the CNBB, in debates about legal changes that would redefine “the beginning of life”. Through its organizational structures and movements such as Catholic Charismatic Renovation, the Catholic Church mobilized rallies “in defense of life” and filed suits before the Brazilian Supreme Court focused on constitutional issues. The Episcopal Conference participated actively in two recent suits; ADI 3.510, which questioned the use of embryonic stem cells in scientific research (2008) and ADPF 54, which challenged the ability to interrupt pregnancy in case of anencephaly of the fetus (2012). It issued statements at public hearings, presented articles in lay and religious media, produced documentary films against the lawsuits, and organized marches in “defense of life”.

Catholic activism against sexual and reproductive rights and demands for gender equality is a global issue. In European countries with a Catholic tradition—yet with more liberal laws concerning gender, sexuality, and reproductive rights—groups related to Catholicism have intensely mobilized to try to limit and even reverse these laws and prevent the legalization of the new feminist and LGBT demands. They appeal to traditional concepts of family and gender relations to defend “life” and oppose the rights, choices, and technologies involved in bioethical debates (of a moral, medical and philosophical order for instance) related to abortion, in vitro fertilization, cloning, euthanasia, and the use of embryonic cells in research.

In Latin America, the advance of sexual and reproductive rights has been recent and, in most countries, limited. Conservative Christian groups and movements lead the actions (including preventive ones) against the legalization and implementation of rights demanded by women and LGBTs and against bioethical regulations. Scholars of Catholicism in Europe labeled these public controversies about the beginning and end of life and sexual and reproductive rights fostered by movements linked to the Catholic Church, as “Catholic activism” (Béraud; Portier, 2015; Turina, 2012; Vaggioni, 2017) or “militant Catholicism” (Garbagnoli; Prearo, 2017). For Isacco Turina (2012), these issues constitute a new field of confrontation between European and Latin American nation-states and the Catholic Church. There are many examples: Episcopal conferences and lay Catholic movements oppose same-sex marriage or civil unions and the inclusion of sex education in school texts in France; assisted reproduction and same-sex marriage in Italy; regulation of abortion in Spain; and euthanasia

in Belgium and Argentina (Portier, 2012; Vagionni, 2017; Dobellaere; Pérez-Agote, 2015; Turina, 2012).

These examples show that the expansion of rights related to gender and human reproduction has sparked an intense reaction by the Catholic ecclesiastic hierarchy. In response to this expansion, they strive to strengthen new movements within the Church, such as charismatic Catholics, and emphasize institutional actions in the moral field.

Finally, in the religious domain, the diversifications of religious and nonreligious actors promoted by the neopentecostal expansion and the increasing numbers of those indifferent to religious organizations fostered a new configuration of disputes in agendas previously monopolized by the Catholic Church. In the 2000s, evangelical leaders also became involved in struggles for changes in regulations of religions in Brazil's civil code (2005), and the definition of human rights in the National Human Rights Program of 2009. They also fought against the privileges acquired by the Catholic Church in the agreement signed between the Brazilian state and the Vatican in 2009, opposing the National Plan for LGBT Citizenship and Human Rights launched by the government in 2009, and supported a law that prohibits animal sacrifice, approved in 2011. This new evangelical protagonism was enhanced by the evangelicals strengthened social position in four large fronts: in the communication media, in parliament, in government agencies, and street demonstrations.

b. The expansion of evangelicals and the occupation of new spaces

The census results presented earlier indicate a significant growth in the population of those who declare themselves to be evangelical or neo-Pentecostal in Brazil since the 1990s. Although the census does not present precise historical data to identify the various religious segments that compose those generically classified as "evangelical", specialists indicate that in the 1960s, Pentecostals constituted 2/3 of the Protestant population. This segment increased intensely between 1991 and 2000, when their growth leaped from approximately 3% to nearly 9% per year (Mariano, 2010), and intensified even more between 2000 and 2010.

In parallel to their numeric expansion, the neo-Pentecostal churches, until very recently were almost invisible, came to occupy public spaces in various spheres, among which stand out the political sphere, through participation in institutional policy, electing representatives and participating in public debates, and the geographic space, through the realization of massive demonstrations and walks. A good example of these new public strategies is the March for Jesus, an demonstration held annually in large Brazilian cities such as São

Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, and which joins evangelicals from various denominations and locations. The tone is festive, with many sound trucks, gospel music, dance, and prayer. According to data from the event organizers, two million people participated in 2019, including prominent politicians, like the governor of São Paulo state and the president of the republic. The evangelicals have also increased their new public visibility through the construction of mega temples and by renting or acquiring concessions for radio stations and TV channels, and more recently, by promoting digital media and social networks. In this sense, the expansion of evangelicals is ostentatious, through the occupation of and presence in a wide variety of public spaces.

The evangelical innovations in the forms of preaching and proselytism began in the 1960s, with addresses conducted in public squares and by gaining increased time on radio and then TV stations. Through this new kind of evangelization outside the temples, the Pentecostal movement spread through Brazilian society, substantially increasing the number of its adherents (Mariano, 2001). Freston (1994) considered it one of the main tools of expansion of Pentecostal churches in the country. Preaching in secular public places and on radio and TV stations was an initiative inaugurated by the church *O Brasil para Cristo* [Brazil for Christ], and, since then, has become one of the characteristics of all Brazilian evangelical churches. These churches now hold numerous radio and TV concessions and some primetime spaces on channels with a broad audience on which they can be heard and seen daily. One of the most emblematic cases of the media importance in this neo-Pentecostal expansion strategies has been the acquiring a government concession to the regular TV channel Record, one of the five largest national channels in terms of audience, by the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* [Universal Church of the Kingdom of God]. This political breakthrough is just one of many examples of the massive presence of the neo-Pentecostal preaching and rituals in the country's media communication. This phenomenon has been studied in recent decades by many social scientists.

In the political sphere, evangelical representatives have been organizing themselves to occupy elective posts, mainly in Congress, forming caucuses, and parliamentary fronts, to defend their interests and positions. The election of evangelical representatives to the National Constitutional Assembly in 1986 was the beginning of their entrance into institutional politics.

Since then, their parliamentary presence has grown steadily. The Brazilian national Congress concentrates the largest concentration of evangelical legislators, and in 2006 had some 40 evangelical deputies. This number more than doubled by the last legislature elected in 2018, reaching 91 representatives, coming from various evangelical

churches. These evangelical legislators are distributed through various Brazilian political parties, most of them in right-wing and central-right parties. However, they are also present in leftist and center-left parties, predominantly pastors from Assembleia de Deus (which has 27 deputies) and Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (with 12 representatives). Since the 1980s the Assembleia de Deus has had a distinct pedagogical proposal: to prepare citizens to vote. Literacy projects for the older population presented voting as a tool that should be used at the service of God, and reading and writing as the knowledge needed to establish the kingdom of heaven. During this first period the focus had been not on promoting candidates but on creating voters. Since these preparatory activities conducted by the Assembleia de Deus for its participation in the Constitutional Assembly in 1986, there has been substantial growth in the number of legislators who declare themselves evangelical. The Assembleia de Deus church, which then had only two legislators, was able to elect 18 legislators by providing religious guidance to voters, making Brazil the first declaredly Catholic country to have a significant number of legislators from a Protestant tradition (Freston, 1994).

Meanwhile, both Igreja Universal and Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus have also been strategic social agents in the process of forming declared evangelical candidates. In the case of the former, the efforts made to prepare candidates led to their active participation in partisan politics since the elections of 2006. The growing presence of candidates who occupy ministerial positions in evangelical denominations in legislative elections is noteworthy. According to the national Superior Electoral Court (TSE), the number of candidates who use the title of “pastor” in campaigns grew 25% from the 2012 to the 2016 elections, reaching 3,316 pastors compared to only 150 Catholic priests. It is already well documented in the literature that their electoral success is closely associated with supporting strategies developed within the churches and to the intensive use of religious media.

Beyond elective positions, the evangelical deputies are also increasingly and intensively involved in disputes over public issues in Brazil. These conflicts often involve social and cultural agendas of minority movements, especially those referring to the expansion of sexual and reproductive rights and to gender, against which Evangelicals strive to bar bills and proposals concerning issues such as abortion and LGBT rights (Machado, 2015).

Concerning LGBT rights, legislators and neo-Pentecostal representatives were even more incisive. Countless proposed laws, public policies, and recent Supreme Court decisions have caused intense reactions among these legislators and other religious leaders. Such was the case

for the release in 2010 of the program “School without homophobia”, by the Ministry of Education, created to prepare and distribute classroom materials about gender diversity. Pentecostal leaders and other conservative groups accused the material of supporting “Gay propaganda” and organized a strong reaction in the Congress to prevent the implementation of that gender diversity program in public schools. Another example of those moral conflicts was the evangelical parliamentarian’s reaction against the legalization of same-sex marriage by the Supreme Court in 2011. This reaction spread from the political arena to other forums, such as the media, with the proliferation of articles and reports from evangelical leaders and legislators against the federal Supreme Court decision. However, the neo-Pentecostal mobilization was not able to prevent a Court decision guaranteeing the civil effects of same-sex marriage. Lastly, a similar oppositional reaction was also the debate in the Chamber of Deputies regarding the proposal of a bill before the 2007-2010 and 2011-2014 legislatures, that sought to criminalize homophobia (PL 122/2006). In this case, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front successfully prevented the proposal from being voted. However, in 2019 the Supreme Court recognized homophobia as a “hate crime” similar to racism. The case raised intense reactions from evangelical groups and religious legislators, but this time they were not able to prevent the Supreme Courts’ decision, at least for now.³

Although they failed to prevent the Supreme Court from recognizing progressive laws, evangelical leaders and legislators gained strong visibility by becoming targets of criticism in the national media. This exposure broadened their audience, previously restricted to religious media, strengthening political gains in the legislature and in elections.⁴

As opposed to Catholicism, which is commonly perceived as part of Brazilian public culture, the evangelical presence in institutional politics and the media provokes disputes and inquiries about their legitimacy. Their legislative representation and their religiously framed arguments in the political sphere are seen as conflict with the laity of the Brazilian state. Interestingly, this charge is rarely raised against Catholic political action. The result is that the evangelical expansion and its public presence have placed the once Republican issue of laity at the center of democratic political debate in a context of religious pluralism.

FROM SYNCRETISM TO PLURALISM

The political and social conditions that, until the mid-twenty-first century, sustained the configuration of Brazilian laity have been profoundly modified in the past nearly quarter of a century. The legal

[3] These examples illustrated the analytical utility of the concept of controversy for understanding religious dynamics in public arenas. This concept was used in previous works (Montero, 2015; Sales, 2014; 2015) to describe the recent formation and configuration of Brazilian public space and the role of moral agency in this construction. In our view, the ethnographic and discursive observation of public controversies—that is, situations of dissension, confrontation, or dispute—enables an empirical description of what is abstractly described in the literature as the public sphere. This approach is inspired mainly by French authors of the Pragmatic Sociology school, which focuses on situations of a dispute as objects of observation.

[4] In a study about the participation of evangelical legislators in the controversy over a bill in the Brazilian national Congress that would criminalize homophobia, the author surveyed news articles about the positions and discourses of evangelical legislators about this issue, published by the three largest nationally circulating newspapers, indicating the immense visibility given to these legislators and their discourses (Bortolin, 2017).

norms that came to guide the new political system with the end of the military dictatorship and the Constitution of 1988 led to a new democratic pact. One of the innovations of the new Constitution was the introduction of pluralism as a new fundamental democratic principle. The scaling of legal tutelage to new political subjects such as the family and ethnic minorities is also noteworthy.

Pluralism, as a new juridical principle, was not meant to regulate religious diversity. But transformations in the political post-authoritarian regime context and the new legal framework that sustained it have affected how religious diversity is perceived by actors and how it has been legally reorganized. As we shown in previous work (Montero 2020a; 2020b; 2020c) until very recently, the notion of syncretism was perceived as positive in the collective Brazilian perception as a model of organizing the diversity of religious practices. Nevertheless, this framing gained an increasingly pejorative political tone while the idea of religious pluralism began to be perceived as more compatible with the newly emerging notion of equality. The syncretic perspective conceived Brazilian nationhood as a harmonious amalgam of various religiosities, although hierarchically organized by the Catholic grammar. Juridical Pluralism, however, understood as the legal recognition of religious and non-religious equality—a right to be guaranteed by the state—,gave way to both changes: on the one hand liberate the various minorities cults from the dogmatic and ritual tutelage of the Catholic Church, and on the other hand, stimulated the criticism against its privileged access to State benefits. The decline of the Catholic hegemony from the 1980s on, rendered indisputable by the spectacular neo-Pentecostal rise, prompt the expansion of this new pluralist religious sensibility. By challenging the traditional and naturalized political pact of the Catholic Church with the state apparatus, and by destabilizing the ecumenical alliances that had been supported by the syncretic sensibility and their implicit hierarchy, the Evangelical expansion encourages a de-syncretization of the Spiritist and Afro-Brazilian cults, whose practitioners until very recently often presented themselves as Catholics, and reinforced ritual and dogmatic frontiers.⁵ One well-known example of this practice of doctrinaire confrontation is the “holy war” promoted by evangelicals who accuse Catholicism of idolatry and Afro-Brazilian religions of satanism. In this process, the classic combat of Catholic leaders against other religions in the name of public order and morality which dominated the public scene during the first half of the twentieth century gave way to a reinforcement of religious identities leading to a dispute between religious denominations over their recognition as religious minorities with legitimate demands for state protection and equity.

[5] The re-Africanization process of the Candomblés must be differentiated from the most recent process of de-syncretization. As mentioned by Gonçalves (1995, pp. 271-87), this search for the lost “pieces” of tradition is part of the Candomblés history during their formation in the first half of the twentieth century. This search for “purity” did not exclude syncretism with Catholic saints and pilgrimages. But, since the 1980s, many leaders search to clean up their rituals from Catholic and indigenous references. In this process of de-syncretization, the return to the African roots becomes less important, at least in the case of Bahian Candomblés. Concerning the Candomblés in São Paulo, endowed with less tradition, the re-appropriation of African elements functioned more as signs of distinction.

These juridical and political changes added to the Evangelical expansion can explain, at least to some extent, the decline of the Catholic hegemony as a supporter of a type of public morality that, until very recently, would give meaning to the idea of nation, hierarchy, and justice. The new concept of citizenship, constructed now around the idea of political, ideological pluralism, and ethnic, gender, religious minorities inclusion which arose through the Constitution of 1988, led to the unprecedented emergence of disputes around civil and cultural rights in the country. Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of evangelical churches and the significant increase of nonreligious people point to a complexification of the relations that until recently sustained Brazil's Catholic, syncretic and hierarchical model of secularism, based on the idea of a homogeneously Christian nationality. The legal recognition of religious and nonreligious diversity lends legitimacy to the non-Catholic cults, promoting competition for public influence among leaderships of various religious segments, and with non-religious political forces. In this context, it became more challenging to negotiate and stabilize consensuses about the meaning and scope of the common good, understood by the actors in dispute in most cases as a capacity to defend their interests in state regulations.

The changes in the pattern of religious/political relations led, as previously mentioned, to conflicts around diversity regulation at different levels of the governmental apparatus. In Congress, multi-party religious coalitions were organized to support agendas of interest to some churches, such as the General Law of Religions of 2009, which sought to confer civil status to religious marriage, guarantee fiscal immunity to religious institutions, and authorize religious assistance in prisons, hospitals, etc. This growth also increased, as we mentioned above, the pressure on moral issues, such as the dispute around the inclusion of homo-affective couples in the constitutional definition of the family.

The growth of non-religious segments, the new legal protections for the family and ethnic minorities offered by the state, the competition among religious leaders to increase their political influence (particularly in the family sphere), associated to the significant increase of the Christian parliamentary caucuses, are, in our understanding, some of the fundamental ingredients that have made Brazilian secularism more litigious. These conflicts are seen in relations between the different religions with the state, in inter-religious relations, and also in the relations between religions and non-religious or even anti-religious segments.

In previous studies, we have analyzed the pattern of controversies triggered by these conflicts in the past three decades. In general, they involve issues that concern the regulation of rights of the family, such

as sexuality, reproduction, abortion, the use of trunk cells in scientific experiments, and others, and the regulation of laity—tax advantages, presence in political-public spheres, etc. Nevertheless, with the diversification of religious and non-religious actors directly interested in the effects of this regulation, the demand for freedom of opinion and consciousness has regularly conflicted with the idea of religious liberty as a public expression of beliefs and worship (Giumbelli, 2002; Montero, 2015). Moreover, in this context of a multiplicity of often conflicting opinions and beliefs, the guarantee of the right to religious equality has subjected state neutrality to criticism and frequently led to the expansion of the political space granted to religions.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The transformations in the religious, ideological, and political fields described in this study have inaugurated a still ongoing process of redefinition of relations between laity and secularism. The evangelical expansion and the growth and diversification of non-religious segments have multiplied the players involved in the controversies mentioned, creating new challenges in the relationship between religious minorities and majorities, and for the frontiers between the religious and the secular.

The controversies raised by the strategies used by Christian leaders to preserve their privileged access to public space and impose, in the name of religious freedom, restrictions of a moral order on society as a whole indicate that pluralism cannot be understood simply as respectful conviviality among private convictions of a diverse nature legally guaranteed, by the non-intervention and secular neutrality of the state. The examples described here show that, in reality, the political exercise of pluralism involves complex negotiations and, paradoxically, growing demands for state regulation. In many situations, the demand for rights by a particular religious group implies suppressing the rights of another minority.

These examples also explain why, at least in Brazil, the liberal discourse of tolerance is not sufficient to establish equality in the conviviality of a wide variety of moral convictions, mainly when they express themselves in public life and strive to impose legal guarantees through increased political influence on the legislature. In this context, courts are repeatedly called on to mediate conflicts and negotiate a version of (in)equality in difference. As we have seen, one of the elements that make pluralism politically controversial is the fact that it enhances the publicization of different religious and moral convictions. In this publicization process, these various convictions are placed on the agendas of the state, political parties, and social movements, and become an

issue of public debate and legal regulation. Based on this presumption, not only does the idea of “state neutrality” become obsolete but so does the very understanding of laity as a simple separation between the state and churches. There is no doubt that, in the Brazilian case, the growing influence of religious parties in elections has intensified the reorganization of relations between state and religious institutions, as well as stimulated new forms of religious regulation. The public promotion of moral convictions challenges the classical notion of secularism as a loss of pertinence of the religious and requires a new reflection on our part.

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