

Pentecostals and Human Rights Controversies in Brazil

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of the discourse of the Pentecostal leadership in Brazil with respect to the idea of human rights, which has served as a point of reference for collective actions on the part of civil society and in the design of public policy, ranging from the economy to public health, sexual education and social welfare. In particular, this article examines controversies surrounding the inclusion of sexual and reproductive rights on the list of human rights in the last decades of the twentieth century, and shows that, despite multiple interpretations within Pentecostalism, the current dominant account in Brazil privileges the right to freedom of expression and belief, and not the acceptance of proposals from social movements, namely, that reproductive and sexual questions should be addressed within the framework of human rights.

Keywords

Pentecostalism; Human Rights; Social Movements.

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Introduction

In this article I present the results of a qualitative study,¹ carried out between 2011 and 2012 with fifty eight Brazilian Pentecostal leaders.² The objective of this investigation was to understand the positions of religious authorities in relation to a number of contemporary social, political and economic issues, including questions about the human rights movement in Brazil. It should be emphasized, however, that even when not prompted to do so by the interviewers, the leaders made references to the concept of human rights, although there were various interpretations of its meaning within the context of their work. In the discussion to follow I examine the way in which human rights concepts appear in the perspectives of these leaders in relation to three distinct but related themes: the increasing participation of Pentecostals in Brazilian politics, abortion and the movement for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Queer (LGBTQ) rights.

Much of the social anthropological literature dedicated to exploring intersections of the religious and legal spheres privileges constitutional questions (Davie 2012), and we can note a growing trend in recent decades of publications concerned with the process of constructing legal frameworks for the relationships between the State and the church in different societies (Baubérot 2007; Berger et al. 2008; Blancarte 2008). The number of studies concerned with the relationship of religion to human rights has slowly increased. Generally, studies have recognized the growing importance of human rights in contemporary Western societies and have emphasized the ambivalent position of religious groups toward the human rights framework (Carrette 2014; Casanova 2009; Santos 2015).

In Carrette's interpretation, the ethical basis of human rights is understood to have emerged from a concern among many religious traditions with human dignity. But, despite this foundational link, the activities of religious groups haven't always aligned well with the principles of human rights. That is, depending on the historical context, religions can protect minority groups or assist in the construction of a political identity for these minorities. But they can also be the source of division, oppression and intolerance, which can, themselves, amount to human rights abuses. We can recall the importance of the evangelical segments of the civil rights movement of the sixties in the United States, while, currently, some Brazilian Pentecostal sectors coming from this evangelical tradition have been reported and investigated by police for intolerant practices in relation to African-Brazilian groups, including destruction of images, invasion of houses of worship, and attacks on the faithful, among others (O Dia 2015).

¹ The project is entitled *Pentecostal Leaders in Latin America: Political and Socio-Economic Attitudes*, funded by the Pentecostal and Charismatic Research Initiative (PCRI) of the University of Southern California, and developed by the author together with professors Paul Freston and Cecilia Mariz.

² These leaders developed activities in the cities of Salvador, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Brasília, Campinas and Rio de Janeiro. Almost all held an ecclesiastical office – pastors, missionaries, bishops, priests – and 18 male respondents had been given permission by the church to take their seats in the Federal Chamber, legislative assemblies, or in municipal chamber of the cities listed above. All the others were pastors which directed welfare programs or were political advisers in the National Congress.

In the same vein, Santos (2015) argues that the relationship of religions to human rights discourse is complex and varies according to different religious traditions and the political situation of a given society. This is the result both of the heterogeneity of discourse within religious confessions, and the increasing 'zones of contact' between the new theologies and the principles of human rights with the liberal matrix. Either way, in the secular legal tradition, religion is typically equated with the private sphere and considered a matter of individual human rights: the right to religious freedom; a state-of-affairs which favors the multiplication of religious groups and create possibilities for both the development of bridges and tension between new theological perspectives and ideas of human rights. While progressive theologies, like liberation theology, offer a radical critique of capitalist exploitation in ways reinforcing some of the principles of human rights, the rise of fundamentalist theologies has caused 'political, cultural and ideological turbulence' in contemporary societies and reproduced social inequalities (Santos 2015).

Religious dialogue, including the incorporation of human rights principles into current religious discourses, is easier in some subject areas, such as those that question economic inequality and social injustice, than in others, as with the case of religious discourses on personal morality (Hagopian 2009). In part this is because such issues as the sexual education of children, reproductive behaviour, homosexuality and abortion demanded a review or revision of the moral theology of Christian churches, which historically has proven to be more resistant to change than have social and political theologies.

Over the previous two decades, scholarship concerned with the sociology of religion has generated comparative research focused on the roles of the individual and of collective religious actors in the public sphere and across different societies. In the process, scholarship has contributed to a conversation around so-called multiple modernities. This approach recognizes the existence 'of multiple patterns of differentiation between the religious and the secular' in the West and therefore expands our capacity to understand the importance of religious expression as part of the contemporary social order (Casanova 2009; Eisenstadt 2000; Hefner 1998). The multiple modernities perspective is pertinent to the study of the intersection of religion and politics in Brazil and to the current public policy debates surrounding the field of sexual reproduction, sexual education and the rights of sexual minorities (Machado 2014). The controversy involves, on one hand, traditional Pentecostals and Catholics, and on the other, feminists and LGBT activists, engaged in regular dispute over the meaning of the values propagated by religious ideals and human rights respectively. This controversy also points to the conflict within the legal system regarding the rights of sexual minorities and individual rights to profess faith in contemporary Brazilian society. Any discussion of this debate, however, needs to acknowledge the contributions Christian groups have made towards the development of the secular ideals of human rights.

The importance of the struggle by European Protestants for religious freedom in defining the basic principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789 has already been well explored (Huber 1996; Witte 1988). Various authors (Banchoff 2011; Davie 2012) have also previously emphasized the important role of Christian groups in the promotion of the global human rights movement, notably in the case of the development of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the case of Latin America, beginning in

the 1960s, social movements have embraced a human rights perspective that closely aligned with parts of progressive Catholicism (Hagopian 2009; Machado 2016; Wilde 2015). In Freston's view, the leadership of the Catholic sectors in the field of human rights is a result of various factors, including the Church's hegemony in the region; the large capacity of articulation of this institution in the international context; and theological changes in the Second Vatican Council and the Medellin and Puebla Conferences (Freston 2011). These three important events caused the *aggiornamento* of the Catholic Church, which started to adopt the so called preferential option for the poor, defending the rights of the oppressed by capitalist economic structures. At the same time, however, in comparison with Catholicism, the fragmented nature of Protestantism, as well as the expansion of Pentecostalism among the poor and less educated groups within society,³ appear to have hindered closer relations between Protestant groups and human rights movements in the region (Freston 2011).

Relations between Christianity and Human Rights in Brazil

Analyses of the contributions made by Christian groups towards the development of a culture of rights in Brazil have also highlighted the role of Catholic groups, since the writing of the first republican constitution. According to Giumbelli (2008: 82–83), Catholic groups were the most important actors in defining the right to religious freedom guaranteed by the 1891 Constitution. This is not because there was an alignment between the institution and international formulations of human rights, but rather because of the 1890 law, which produced the separation between the state and the Catholic Church, and was viewed as a threat to 'the legal autonomy of religious associations'. With support from other social groups, the Catholics managed to alter the articles referring to religious freedom, ensuring that in the 1891 constitution, 'all individuals and religious denominations can exercise publicly their worship, and to this end, the purpose of acquiring of property, as observed in the common law (Art. 72–73)' Giumbelli (2008: 83).

Montero (2012: 169) argues the struggle of Catholics for the right to freedom of consciousness in this historical context ended up as a model for the definition of civil rights in the first Republican constitution. In her own words,

It must be recognised that the Catholic church in Brazil – still the most influential religious institution in the country – always acted, materially and symbolically, in the formulation of the idea of rights (individual, collective and cultural) and was an important factor in the construction of a model for civil society in at least three important moments: from the beginning of the Republic until the 1970s fighting against positivist and anti-clerical forces for the definition of civil and religious freedom; in the 1970s and 1980s, collaborating in the constructions of social rights; in the following decades, aligning itself with the struggles for ethnic rights. Generally, it can be affirmed, therefore, that for the Republic, until the end of the dictatorship period, the Catholic Church was an integral part of the process of legitimisation of the demands for protection of individual rights and freedom of conscience.

³ See Mariz 1994.

Catholic leaders' negotiations with human rights perspectives had its limits, as would soon be revealed by feminists, who faced opposition from sectors of Catholicism during the constitutional process initiated in the second half of the 1980s. Since then, feminist allegations of interference from the Catholic Church in public policies in the field of the sexuality and reproductive health of women have grown (Rosado-Nunes 2008). Since the 1990s, other voices have reinforced this perception that a compromise between religious discourses and human rights with respect to gender and sexuality was no easy task, with gay activists and researches revealing the Church's opposition to AIDS prevention policies (free distribution of condoms and campaigns encouraging the use of the same in the media) and to the inclusion of sexual rights as human rights (Machado and Piccolo 2011).

The opinions and attitudes of Brazilian evangelical⁴ groups regarding human rights, however, have largely been unexplored. This is due not only to the minority position of Evangelicals⁵ but also to their established position of non-participation in much of the political debate surrounding the history of the Brazilian Republic. Thus, the research team found a small number of analyses about evangelical participation in the debate surrounding religious freedom in the first half of the twentieth century and the participation of evangelicals in the peasant leagues and social movements opposing the military authoritarianism which marked the 1960s, 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s (Freston 1993; Novaes 1985).

Regarding the current position of Pentecostal groups to social movements and to a human rights-based approach we can briefly affirm that through the end of the 1970s the rejection of participation in politics and social mobilization were common features of Pentecostal groups, which expanded in popularity among the poor during this period (D'Épinay 1970; Willens 1967). The politicization of Pentecostal segments only became visible at the beginning of the 1980s, when the number of politicians with a Pentecostal identity increased sharply in the National Congress, overtaking the number of legislators from the other Protestant groups (Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, etc.).

In the last two decades, we have observed a significant increase in scholarly attention to the expansion and implications of Pentecostal representation in Brazil's national legislature,⁶ verifying a consensus about the great capacity of Pentecostal groups to reinvent itself in Brazilian society. As part of this

⁴ In Brazil, both the non-Pentecostal protestants and the Pentecostal protestants declare themselves as Evangelicals. That is the reason why researchers started to use this category (Evangelicals) when they refer to non-Catholic Christians.

⁵ Although Catholicism is still the predominant religion in the country, this religion declined during the second half of the 20th century, and the loss of the faithful has intensified since the beginning of 1990, in favour of Evangelical churches. According to the census by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, while the representation of Catholics in Brazilian society declined from 83.3% in 1991 to 73.8% in 2000 and 64.6% in 2010, during the same period, Evangelicals evolved from 9% to 15.6% and 22.2% (Machado 2013).

⁶ According to the census of 2010, Pentecostals represent 13% of the Brazilian population. The Federal Chamber consists of 513 politicians, and the participation of Evangelical – Pentecostals as well as non-Pentecostals – was 12% in 2010. The majority of Evangelical politicians in the House are, however, Pentecostal.

reinvention process, we can highlight the incorporation of the original form of some beliefs and practices of other religious traditions, the use of television to publicize their activities and to attract believers, as well as the losing up of some rules regarding clothing and behaviour of its members (Machado 2006; Mariano 2005). The discussions about the involvement of Pentecostal groups in the political debate surrounding human rights are much more recent. They date from the conservative activism of the Pentecostal leadership during the launch of the National Human Rights Program-3 (NHRP)⁷ in 2009 as well as the electoral cycles of 2010 and 2014. In general, analysis suggests a selective appropriation of some of the principles of human rights with an emphasis on religious freedom of assembly (Duarte 2013; Duarte et al. 2009; Machado and Piccolo 2011; Vital and Lopes 2013).

For Freston (2011), one of the factors causing the greatest difficulty for Pentecostal groups with respect to the liberal ideology of rights lies on the Pentecostal world-view, which values 'individual personal agency' and the use of spiritual power to fight evil. In other words, this world-view presents characteristics that contrast with the idea of collective human rights, which tends 'to place these same individuals as victims of social processes'. Additionally, the human rights movement seems to have difficulty embracing religious movements from the poorer sectors of Brazilian society, which often have a proselytizing character, and emphasize the agency or the creative capacity that individuals can develop when they accept the principles of Pentecostal doctrines. That is, protests from human rights movements tend to present a secular narrative that does not accept the magical practices, such as exorcism, which are common in Pentecostal circles (Freston 2011: 120–121).

It is important to note that Pentecostalism is a heterogeneous phenomenon that encompasses multiple faith communities and renovated churches, with various discourses regarding modernity, politics and the contemporary social order. These discourses, which at first seem to dispute the contemporary interpretation of gender relations and sexuality, also suggest broader clashes with distinct proposals of modernity. In my interpretation, such differences result from the multiple forms of combination between religious values and other discursive fields such as the human sciences, psychology, human rights, and including the ideologies of current social movements in Brazilian society.

Religious Minority and Political Representation

Likewise there is a plurality of doctrines and contending discourses within Pentecostalism, not only in terms of politics but also regarding individual rights and the rights of religious groups in contemporary Brazilian society. In

⁷ After democratisation, there has been a commitment by the Brazilian state to strengthen Human Rights in the country. Thus, as from the 1990s three national plans have been launched: the NHRP1 (1996), which emphasized civil and political rights; the NHRP-2 (2002), 'which incorporated economic, social, cultural and environmental rights'; and the NHRP-3 approached distinct and controversial themes such as the decriminalization of abortion and the creation of protection networks for the human rights of bisexuals, travesties and transsexuals.

this regard, although article five of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution defines religious freedom as an individual right, we nevertheless see a predominant interpretation that reflects a more corporate emphasis, and one in which religious communities might claim collective rights. In this way, Pentecostal participation in elections is understood in terms of the rights of a religious minority – in this case, so-called ‘believers’ or Evangelicals⁸ – who have always been disregarded by the state and by political elites. It is thus interpreted as a legal strategy to reduce inequalities of Pentecostal groups in relation to Catholics who are represented in the political sphere and act in the definition of Brazilian law.

In the 1990’s, the process of diffusion of Pentecostalism.

occurred primarily in the less privileged social stratas, both on the outskirts of cities and in urban areas, amongst women, the black population (black+brown), poorly educated and among the young. Thus, we can roughly say that Brazil is going through a process of religious and cultural change, with the spreading of the evangelical message, which is happening from the bottom up, in social terms, from the periphery to the center, in spatial terms, the urban to the rural in terms of household situation, from blacks to whites in ethnic and racial terms, from the young to the elderly in terms of generation and from women to men in terms of gender (Diniz 2009).

In the following decades, the theology of prosperity developed within neo-Pentecostal groups would stimulate the advance of Pentecostalism within the middle classes. Questions regarding the asymmetrical treatment granted by the Brazilian state to the Catholic Church and evangelical groups have become increasingly prominent. In other words, arguments based on Pentecostalism’s increasing number of followers have led to the perception of a greater capacity for the mobilization of Pentecostal communities. Amongst our interview respondents, the prevailing opinion was that the second largest religious tradition in the country has contributed important values to the national political culture, legitimating Evangelical demands for greater participation in the political sphere.

A leader from the Parliamentary Evangelical front in the National Congress stated that ‘the majority of the population is Christian and Brazil is a democratic country. Thus, all social groups have the right to place in the Congress those who best represent them. And because of this, we have the clear objective to conquering greater space in both politics and society’. This type of argument repeatedly appears in the discourses of Pentecostal leaders to justify the move away from negatively held views of politics, placing an emphasis on engagement by members of these communities with political parties, in the electoral process and political debates.

According to one pastor who was born in 1934, the ‘scourge’ of corruption has deep roots in Brazilian political history and responsibility cannot be attributed to confessional communities which ‘frightened by the possibility of contamination’, kept themselves away from this sphere for the greater part of the last century. After all, their generation learned from their parents that the ‘church

⁸ The Pentecostal politicians use this category [Evangelicals] in their speeches to show themselves as political representatives of a segment broader than Pentecostalism.

comes from god and politics comes from a dog or the devil. And that one thing should not mix with the other'. In recent decades this leader has revised his position of rejecting electoral politics, as can be seen below:

I talked to the pastors: 'Look, today we are several million Brazilians, and we are Brazilians just like anyone else who pays taxes. We also have our rights. So, why not become part of the government? That was when we began to elect some Congressmen'.

The process of reconfiguring the relationship of Pentecostal discourse to the political has come about with the incorporation of legal arguments, which, when intertwined with religious formulations, take on new meanings. The individualistic character of Pentecostalism is indisputable, but we can also note a legal shift away from the individual to a more collective identity that is responsive to and can be transformative of civil society and politics. The formulation of this narrative of a religious minority that seeks fundamentally to influence the design of social policy and define the process for the construction of human rights in the country through the lens of its own religious values is contentious, however. In this discursive revision, the individual, as the bearer of both the right to religious freedom and the right to vote, often appears to disappear or be displaced by the corporate religious group or church whose interests guide their political action.

Nevertheless some interview respondents expressed a minimalist vision of politics that emphasizes the need to represent the interests of Evangelicals in the spaces of power, while others express an appreciation for the collective actions of civil society. Even amongst those who employ traditional concepts of politics, different uses of these concepts were made. On one hand, some leaders present politics as a means of resistance and/or 'survival for Christians' suffering from the advance of relativism and secularism. On the other, some embraced politics as a means of implementing an Evangelical hegemony within the political sphere of Brazilian society (Machado and Burity 2014).

It should be clear that the relationship of Evangelicalism to politics remains ill-defined. In this debate, as in questions of doctrine and the governance of confessional communities, a consensus proposal is not easy to construct. What exists, are narratives about a Christian nation, which sometimes involve Catholics and sometimes present them as responsible for the cultural vices of Brazilians. However, the view that it is necessary to act in the political sphere in favour of Pentecostals seemed to predominate. To this end, stated goals included creating more active citizens and a political leadership which can occupy the space of political power, propose laws and public policy consistent with Christian ideals. In other words, there is an expectation that the greater involvement of Evangelicals in politics could transform society. One female pastor who founded a Pentecostal church stated that

In 1989 I had a vision and the holy spirit told me Brazil's redemption would come through the church. Not that I believe in a theocratic state, but I believe in Christians who live by the values of the kingdom, truly where they are. I believe that god's people, living by the Gospel, the church expanding and arriving at universities, politics and all social groups. Because it is not enough to be evangelical, the individual has to have the culture, has to be trained, they have to have the intellectual capacity to begin a project of transforming the nation, which really changes the political, economic and social situation of the people.

These kinds of arguments demonstrate that the ongoing reconfiguration of the political positions of Pentecostals, especially as related to their relationship to political parties and the Brazilian legislature, follows a peculiar path that challenges the expectations from different social movements fighting for the secular nature of the state. After all, the Pentecostal leadership interprets the legislature as a space in which different groups are represented and defend their own interests, but where legal norms will ultimately be defined according to the values of a Christian majority.

The Right to Life beyond the Secular Principles of the Brazilian Constitution

Since the Constituent Assembly of 1986, there has been an increase in the clashes between Christians and feminists around the theme of the legalisation of abortion in Brazil.⁹ In that context, whilst the latter wanted to expand the legal permission of abortion to be included in the constitution then being drafted, Catholics and Evangelicals condemned the authorization of abortion in cases where women had been raped. It should be made clear however, that there are different positions about abortion among Evangelicals. Some churches have been more flexible regarding the demands to revise existing national legislation, in response to the influence of the feminist movement. Even within the Pentecostal movement, there are leaders who present a more liberal discourse regarding abortion (Duarte et al. 2009; Machado 2013).

However, the prevailing view amongst Pentecostals is still traditional and associates globalization with the spread of ideologies harmful to the traditional Christian family, ideologies that amplify risk of the moral disintegration of Brazilian society (Machado 2013). For Pentecostals, these are transnational ideologies which have largely been well-received among the political elite as well as local social movements. The existence of proposed legislation in the National Congress aimed at regulating the work of sex workers, decriminalizing abortion, and advancing gay rights is interpreted as a sign that the battle to be fought by Christians requires their active presence in the legislature.

Despite competition with the Catholic Church in recruiting worshippers and partnerships with government agencies, coordinated efforts from civil society and within the National Congress have been made possible by cooperation between religious actors from both wings of Christianity. According to a director of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the National Congress, the political rapprochement of the two groups was initiated at the Brazilian National Conference of Bishops. And from the mid-2000s joint actions promoted together by Pentecostal and Catholic politicians are increasingly frequent. One evangelical missionary told us that together with a Catholic priest she was lobbying politicians forming the 54th Legislature of the Federal Chamber (2011–2015) against

⁹ According to the 1940 Penal code, abortion is permitted in two circumstances: if there is risk to the mother and rape. In 2012, as a result of the feminist movement, the Supreme Court approved Fundamental Breach Percept 54 – allowing the termination of pregnancy in cases of foetal anencephaly.

the legal amendments proposed by the women's movement and in defence of the life of the foetus.

The alliances of Pentecostal politicians in the Congress are primarily with charismatic Catholic law makers, but the statements make clear that there is a much broader network which also involves transnational movements such as Pro-Life and Pro-Family. This network has been organising a course to prepare Brazilian Christian militants, Catholics and Evangelicals, for the debate about human life and to persuade pregnant women not to have an abortion. According to the lobbyist quoted above, 'We work against all these anti-life, anti-Christian laws which favour the 'culture of death' here in the National Congress. We help MPs to prepare bills which pertain to life and the family, according to Christian principles and we accompany the votes taken in the commissions and plenary'.

The expression 'culture of death' can also be found widely in the speeches, books and documentaries of the Catholic Church (Paul II), as well as in the material produced by the Pro-life movement which is distributed in different countries. This expression suggests that the threats to human dignity result from different tendencies occurring in contemporary secular societies, with one of the most important of these being the legalisation of abortion in various countries throughout the world.

Studies on parliamentary performance in the Brazilian Congress (Emmerick 2013; Machado 2018) confirm the collaboration of these religious groups and show an increase in the number of legislative proposals related, directly or indirectly, to the phenomenon of abortion. These researchers also show a predominance of propositions opposing the demands for greater autonomy by the feminist movements'. Except for the initiatives of a few legislators allied with the Universal Kingdom of God Church, all the other proposals have been aimed at revising existing legislation, with the objective of transforming the legal status of the foetus (which would become a 'person with rights') and/or reducing the legal rights of women¹⁰ (Emmerick 2013).

In our research, many Pentecostals argued that legal systems should express the values of the majority of the population, which is Christian. Such a position suggests that, despite identifying as a minority discriminated against by Catholics, many Pentecostals do not recognize any parallelism with their own fight against the legalization of abortion. That is, the respondents do not recognize feminists as representatives of a social group, or as women who are in a subordinate position in society. They also disregard the possibility of women without religion, or linked to non-Christian groups who may not require the sharing of Christian values. When asked by the interviewer if the concept of human rights was important amongst Brazilian Evangelicals, or if it is viewed as something strange, one leader made clear:

¹⁰ In recent years, Pentecostal legislators have worked towards bill No 478/2007, which provides for the status of the unborn foetus. It was approved in the commissions and sent to the House for a vote. In 2013, a Pentecostal deputy, issued a report favouring the approval of the text in the Social Security and Family Commission, ensuring an unborn human being the right to life, health and public policy which guarantees its development.

I think it depends on the aspect of human rights, because there are various areas where human rights are claimed: because I understand that the Gospel is a question of human rights. The Lord Jesus was a defender of human rights. So, I think that the Evangelical Church brings this principle to human rights. Now, depending on the connotation which society makes, whether it is the question of abortion or these emerging questions such as same sex marriage... When this interpretation of human rights is contrary to what the Bible advocates, then the Church will always oppose it. I think that human rights are those which the Bible advocates.

Reinforcing the thesis of an absence of consensus among Pentecostals about the extent and application of rights, we identified dissenting discourses regarding existing legal norms. A significant number of respondents only legally recognize a risk to the mother's health and rape as justifications for abortion and, therefore, see no reason to change existing Brazilian legislation. However, a pastor from a dissident group of the Assembly of God Church, who emphasized the necessity of separating political life from religious opinions – as private questions which should follow the principles of secularism – repeatedly noted, 'I believe we should negotiate in view of what is possible, and not simply close our eyes to the deaths of so many women because of a personal conviction. We need to negotiate these questions'. This line of argument, approaching the perspective of the lesser evil, was the position closest to the demands of the feminist movements'.

In the discourse of these leaders about abortion, we can identify an attempt to articulate the concept of natural rights granted by God to his children wedded to a liberal perception of individual rights. The principle of the inviolability of the right to life, which can be found in the 1988 Constitution, frequently appears in the speeches of Pentecostal legislators regarding feminist claims to women's rights over their own bodies. In this way, religious arguments are brought together with legal and secular ones.

Beyond conflicts which might arise between a pregnant woman's right to abortion and the right to life of the foetus, the prevailing view among Pentecostals is that the vulnerable condition of the latter requires special protection, placing it in a relatively advantageous position. In this sense, with respect to the passage in the Constitution about the inviolability of the right to life, some leaders defend changing article 5, Chapter 1, which deals with the fundamental rights and guarantees of the Brazilian people, to include the words 'from conception'. Both in the interviews and in the legislative efforts of the respondents, scientific arguments are used to provide more legitimacy to the legal position of amending the legal status of the foetus.

In brief, although the prevailing position amongst those leaders interviewed was in favour of maintaining existing legislation, more liberal positions advocating the decriminalization of abortion were also identified. But more conservative positions advocating suspension of the present permissiveness of the law, and public registration of abortion in hospitals to the extent of its criminalization, were also identified. Notably, those with the most conservative opinions appear to predominate among the leadership within the legislature. In other words, the most traditional interpretations of the right to life were preferred positions among those who identify themselves as representatives of the 'evangelical people'. This fact can obscure small but significant changes which have taken place within Pentecostalism as a whole.

Tensions between the Right to Freedom of Thought and the Rights of Sexual Minorities

Just as Brazilian feminists adopted human rights perspectives in the fight for social recognition and the decriminalization of abortion, gays and lesbians also privilege the development of an identity politics based on the language of human rights. It should be made clear that, initially motivated by the AIDS epidemic, these social groups have become important collective actors in the last three decades. With an increasing capacity for political mobilisation, gays and lesbians have forced society to debate polemical themes such as the different types of sexuality, same-sex marriage, the adoption of children by same-sex couples, the criminalisation of homophobia, the inclusion of sexual realignment surgery amongst the service offered by the health system, among other issues. During the 2000s and the two governments of Luis Inácio da Silva (Workers' Party), this movement has managed to develop a series of initiatives to change the undervalued status of gays and lesbians in society, displeasing the majority of the most conservative Evangelicals.¹¹

This close relationship between the Brazilian State and the gay and lesbian movement has facilitated the issues concerning the sexual minorities demands to be presented openly in the interviews related to both the political action of pentecostals and the human rights. The analysis of the data reveals that the majority of leaders disagree with the prevalent conceptions of sexuality and human rights within the gay movement and some respondents have developed legislative strategies to impede the inclusion of sexual rights on the list of human rights. One such strategy is the occupation of seats in the special working commissions which debate proposed bills in the legislative house and which decide if the bills do or do not harm the constitution, allowing or rejecting the possibility of a bill to pass for plenary vote.

One Pentecostal legislator, who at the time of the interview represented the Social Christian Party in the commission of Human Rights in the legislative assembly of Minas Gerais (a Brazilian state), declared that

the right to be free (free agency) cannot be combated, because it is one of the most precious things that God gave to man and women. God only said: if you do this, this will happen, so don't do this! One thing is to offer advice; it is something else to interfere in personal freedom. They [LGBTQ activists] will continue being the way they are, they will think this [LGBTQ ways of life] is correct, that it is not a problem, that it is normal...now, we are here to demonstrate that they also have an option to change their lives through the Gospel, through preaching. We do what we can; we have to be responsible for what we were called to do. We have been called and we are here to serve God and thy will be done.

This quote, whilst at the same time highlighting the free will god has given to humankind, also makes use of the concept of normality, which comes from the field of biomedicine and, since at least the nineteenth century, has also been incorporated into various sociological and psychological theories. This

¹¹ Among these measures were: 'Brazil without Homophobia': a program to combat violence and discrimination against GLBT and promote homosexual citizenship' (2004) and the 1st National Conference on Public Policy and human rights of LGBT (2008).

concept reiterates heterosexuality as a social norm and associates sexual experiences between people of the same sex as an anomaly which has been principally related with psychological and domestic problems. This view has already been challenged by narratives more closely aligned with the demands of social movements, which have been contributing to these fields of knowledge. However, religious leaders tend to adopt those pseudo-scientific perspectives most closely related to their own positions when they are compelled by cultural changes around them to review their value systems (Machado 2016). A Christian missionary, who professionally graduated in psychology, reported that during the 1990s she developed the ministry in order 'to help homosexuals'. But it suffered much 'persecution' from other psychologists connected with the gay movement. According to her words:

I was active in the Christian Psychological and Psychiatric Corps (CPPC), and was encouraged to be part of a ministry of support. However, in 1999, the Federal Council of Psychology issued a resolution which prohibited psychologists from helping anyone who voluntarily wished to move away from homosexuality and also to speak publicly about the matter. After the resolution, the CPPC retreated because they wanted to obey the resolution from the Psychology Council. But as I understood it, it was God who had called me to help homosexuals, and I did not agree and so left the institution. I didn't understand at the time why this restriction of the rights of psychologists to help homosexual people. I will continue to support people in the homosexual condition.

This quote is important because it demonstrates the complex relations of the religious sphere with other cultural spheres, as well as the presence of Christians in different institutional spaces which exist within Brazilian society. This missionary, who later was sanctioned by the Federal Council of Psychology, had to review the way in which she worked and was, according to his report, required to complete a course in the area of human rights in order to work alongside the Christian legislators in the National Congress, defending Christian principles.

Like her, the majority of respondents avoided the traditionally held association of homosexuality with demonic possession. One pastor recognised that there was 'prejudice against gays and also very little information' about homosexuality in society. In his opinion 'there are a series of indicators which associate homosexuality with abuse suffered during childhood'. Another leader stated that LGBTQ movement – with their aim of legislative change and of expanding their own rights – 'claim that a person is born homosexual, but there is no scientific proof of this'.

Political advisers and Pentecostal legislators are conscious of the fact they cannot 'give the impression that our great cause is to persecute gays' and the political action of the Evangelical camp has a deliberately reactive character, making few public policy proposals. The solution found by Pentecostals has been to present their political positions in relation to sexual minorities as defending freedom of thought. In this discursive formulation, minorities plead for 'privileged treatment' in a society marked by Christianity and heteronormativity, and if their demands were embraced by the broader political sphere, the right to freedom of thought might be threatened. Worried about the consequences of the proposed bill, PL122, which aims to criminalise gender discrimination and sexual orientation, one Pentecostal politician stated:

We have to occupy space because we have a plenary discussion forum, and in the plenary we have the guarantee of immunity which the mandate gives us. So, we can say what we want to say. Although this is a sacred right of the constitution, freedom of expression, the pastors [who do not have parliamentary immunity] need to think a great deal before speaking in church and the media about the issue of homosexuality. Because us Christians, Evangelical and Catholic, we are considered to be homophobic by the homosexual movement. For us, they are 'Christophobic' and if there is space to speak, this space will be increasingly occupied. What the gays want isn't the conquest of rights but rather the conquest of privileges.

As other have shown (Duarte et al. 2009; Machado and Piccolo 2011; Vital and Lopes 2013), the presentation of this project in the Federal Chamber in 2001, by a Workers' Party deputy, intensified the conflicts between the social movements and Pentecostal leaders. The activism of pastors in the media and the mobilization of Evangelical legislators failed to avoid approval of this project in the Federal Chamber and its forwarding to the Senate in 2006. However, after holding it up in the House for various years and using a clear strategy of creating obstacles to prevent its approval, Senators linked to religious groups succeeded at the end of 2013 in connecting the course of PL122 to examining the reformation of the Penal Code.

The sexual minority agenda is broad, but the strong reaction to the proposed criminalization of homosexuality masks more nuanced positions in relation to civil unions between people of the same sex and even the adoption of children by these couples. A few respondents, although fearful that PL122 might compromise the right of religions to express their beliefs, recognized the possibility of civil union between people of the same sex and the need for churches to establish 'new forms of cohabitation with homosexuals'. This is not acceptance 'of homosexuals, but relearning how to talk with this type of person. Because they can't be treated as the skinheads treat them'. In other words, it is not possible any longer to ignore homosexual worshippers or 'to climb up on the pulpit and claim that God doesn't accept homosexuals and that homosexuals will not inherit the kingdom of God'. A new way of approaching this social group has to be created by pastors and, in the opinion of the respondents, this must be a change that resonates throughout Pentecostalism.

The appointment of the pentecostal Representative Marco Feliciano to be Chairman of the Human Rights and Minorities Commission in 2013 indicates that the Pentecostal politicians were not only adjusting their agenda to defend Christian morality but also seeking to occupy strategic spaces for the disputes about minority rights. That is, Pentecostal interests in this commission suggest the increasing recognition of the importance of human rights in contemporary society. On the other hand, it expresses a new phase in the dispute between traditional groups and social movements with a more liberal character.

It should be noted that during the presidency of the Pentecostal legislator, the Commission approved bill PDC 234/2011, which became known nationally as the 'gay cure'. This bill was presented by a Pentecostal Representative. The project proposed abolishing the resolution of the Federal Council of Psychology, which prohibits professionals working in the field from treating gays and lesbians in order to change their sexual orientation. As might be expected, the bill's presentation generated a strong reaction from LGBTQ movements. As a result, the bill's author retreated, and the bill was filed.

However, the election of Eduardo Cunha in 2015, a rigid Pentecostal politician, to preside over the Federal Chamber suggests that the conservatism in the Brazilian Parliament goes beyond Christian groups. He was supported by a wide range of politicians upset with the policies adopted by the Workers' Party, and as soon as he assumed the presidency of the House, he created a commission to accelerate the passing of a bill establishing the Statute of the Family. The bill (No. 6583/2013), presented by Pentecostal legislator Anderson Ferreira, defined the family as a union between one man and one woman and if it were approved, could prevent same-sex couples from adopting children (Folha de São Paulo 2015).

The proposals of the women's and gay rights movement examined in this and the previous section, though they include the issues of abortion and sexual orientation in the human rights role, may have different consequences for religious groups that disagree with them. While the proposal to criminalize homophobia follows a traditional punitive trend of Brazilian law that may limit religious proselytism, proposals to expand or decriminalize abortion do not directly threaten religious actors. Those proposals conflict with the Christian belief that life is a divine gift that must be preserved, but don't foresee punishment for persons expressing their opinions against abortion. These different proposals make some Pentecostals, though they assume the defense of life, adopt a more assertive discourse and more aggressive initiatives to combat the criminalization of homophobia.

However, the possibility of reconfiguring religious discourse appears greater in the field of sexuality than in the case of abortion. Although Pentecostals have resisted legislative proposals which expand rights, both for stable unions and the criminalization of sexual discrimination, some leaders have recognized that, like divorce, stable unions between people of the same sex will become an institution and that the religious community will eventually have to deal with this reality. There are dissenting voices that express a more inclusive awareness of social plurality, while also acknowledging Pentecostal communities. Their argument is, if Pentecostal groups want to secure a place in contemporary society, they will have to adapt to cultural changes and understand that observing religious principles is soon to be applied only by believers. Even though numerically not significant, their leaders can help the LGBTQ movement in the struggles against conservative forces – religious and non-religious alike – in the National Congress, once they reveal cracks in Pentecostalism.

Final Considerations

The last three decades have been marked not only by the strengthening of Human Rights in Brazilian society, but also by the simultaneous advance of conflicting cultural movements. On one hand, the country has seen the rise in human rights movements focused on the rights of women and of sexual minorities. On the other, it has witnessed the emergence of the Pentecostal movement. The strategies of feminists and of the LGBT community to implement their respective cultural agendas in Brazil have utilized the language of universally accepted human rights in an attempt to situate their interests within these rights. This has led to an increase in disputes around the meaning of human

rights between the various individual and collective political actors – religious, LGBT, and feminist.

The fact that the interests of Pentecostal sectors appear to conflict with the demands of LGBTQ and feminist movements should not, however, be interpreted as a denial of the project of modernity as a whole. Pentecostal leaders have their own conceptions of human rights, modernity, democracy, and the state, as well as political projects, albeit not very well defined for the country. The expansion of the Pentecostal movement has been interpreted (Burity and Machado 2006) as a sign of democratization in religious and political fields. I would also add that it is an expression of the type of modernity that Brazilian society has been developing since the twentieth century. And if the majority of the Pentecostal leadership rejects abortion and the advance of gay rights, which have been guiding Brazilian public policy in the field of reproductive health, education and human rights, this phenomenon should be discussed by taking into account the antagonist nature of democracy.

With the discourse of a religious minority front against Catholics, Pentecostal leaders make use of the language of individual and collective rights in order to defend their own claims for greater participation in public debate and the political sphere. This leadership seeks to build bridges with the ideals of human rights, but often – and the clearest case in this regard is their position of defending the right to life – the source of inspiration is the Christian formulation of natural law of men. Notably, it is not that Pentecostals do not value the existing legal realities prevailing in contemporary Brazilian society, but rather that the majority of leaders interviewed want to halt the process of the broadening of the concept of human rights, and so make use of Christian formulations while taking care to reinforce these with scientific arguments.

Admittedly, despite great difficulty, the feminist and the LGBT movement have succeeded in having their themes included on the agenda of Evangelical churches, and more liberal voices and initiatives have begun to come to light in the press, TV media and social networks of different denominations. The increasing trend of women priests in Pentecostal communities and the creation of inclusive churches focusing on sexual minorities are some of the most significant examples. The churches are small, but they have mobilized their members to participate in gay parades that are held in major Brazilian cities, and have organized events with the religious community to discuss the issue of human rights. In recent years, these voices were joined by other non-gay theologians and pastors who approached the perspectives of gender and queer theory and have criticized intolerance within the Pentecostal universe to homosexuals. The deepening of this debate in the public sphere can benefit homosexual movements, reducing the resistance of the leaders and Pentecostal faithful to the politics of recognition of Brazilian LGBTQ subjects.

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