

PENTECOSTALISM IN BRAZIL: CHURCHES, BUSINESSES AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Lukas Lingenthal

Brazil is often described as the biggest Catholic country in the world. While this description is valid when looked at in terms of the absolute number of Catholic Church members, it ignores the fact that Brazil is also the biggest country in another respect – namely the largest Pentecostal country in the world. A census carried out in 2000 suggested that 15.4 per cent of the population is Protestant,¹ alone 11.3 per cent being Pentecostal². According to a survey published by the daily newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* in 2010, the figure for all Protestant groups taken together could be as high as 25 per cent. Almost four-fifths of these, 19 per cent of the population, are believed to belong to a Pentecostal Church.³ The number of Catholics was estimated at only 61 per cent of the total population, while other surveys suggest that the number of Catholics is still



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- 1 | Literature on the subject tends to use the term "Protestant" to include Pentecostalism alongside the traditional Protestant churches (Lutheran, Calvinist, Methodist, Baptist).
- 2 | The word "Pentecost" comes from ancient Greek and is used to refer to a Jewish holiday in the New Testament, which became particularly significant to Christians, as it was on this day that the Holy Spirit was meant to have descended upon Jesus.
- 3 | Bernardo Mello Franco, "Presidenciáveis disputam voto evangélico", *Folha de São Paulo*, April 26, 2010, <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/brasil/ult96u725952.shtml> (accessed August 22, 2011); The results of the study from previous years, when compared with earlier census results, show that the discrepancy between them is actually quite small, but both show the same trend and with almost the same speed of change. The study can therefore serve as a useful basis for prognosis.

nearer to 68 per cent.⁴ The truth probably lies somewhere in between. Either way, this is still a dramatic change as far as the Catholic Church in Brazil is concerned.

This rapid shift in the balance of power has become particularly apparent in the last two decades and raises the question of why this has happened and what impact it will have on society as a whole. Pentecostalism in Brazil is very diverse. Some churches are very conservative, with relatively few members and a tendency to stay out of the public eye, while other churches have millions of members, hold clamorous religious services with thousands of worshippers, own publishing and TV companies to spread their message and have a direct influence on politics.

THE ORIGINS AND EXPANSION OF PENTECOSTALISM IN BRAZIL

Literature on the subject tends to divide the spread of Pentecostalism into three phases, each of which was accompanied by significant changes to the Pentecostal Church's behaviour and strategic mission.

Beginning of the 20th Century

The battle between God and the Devil is reflected in all aspects of life, so all individuals need to strive for sanctification in order to rid themselves of demons.

Pentecostalism itself originated in the USA, where the first congregations to follow this new evangelical doctrine, whose theological roots lay predominantly in Methodism, began

to take root in around 1900. The battle between God and the Devil lies at the centre of their theology. This battle is reflected in all aspects of life, so all individuals need to strive for sanctification in order to rid themselves of demons. The sanctification can be achieved through baptism in the Holy Spirit, which is celebrated as a kind of ecstatic experience and which is a prerequisite for being accepted as a full member of a Pentecostal church.⁵ The Swedes Daniel

4 | Paula Adamo Idoeta, "Proporção de católicos volta a cair no Brasil; crescem evangélicos e ateus", *BBC Brasil*, August 23, 2011, http://bbc.co.uk/portuguese/noticias/2011/08/110823_religioes_fgv_pai.shtml?s (accessed September 2, 2011); Josef Oehrlein, "Religiöse Heimstatt der neuen brasilianischen Mittelklasse", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 21, 2010.

5 | Cf. Franz Höllinger, *Religiöse Kultur in Brasilien. Zwischen* ▶

Berg and Gunnar Vingren, who were both inspired by Pentecostalism in the USA, set off for the State of Pará in Brazil in 1910, claiming that God had instructed them to do so in a vision. They initially joined a Baptist congregation in the city of Belém, before being asked to leave because of the nature of what they were preaching. Together with some of the congregation members, who they had already converted to their beliefs and who left the Baptist congregation with them, they founded the Assembléia de Deus (Assembly of God) as one of the first two Pentecostal churches in Brazil.

The other Brazilian Pentecostal church in the early days was the Congregação Cristã (Christian Congregation). It was founded by the Italian Louis Francescon in the Italian Brás quarter in São Paulo, and in the beginning, it only had Italian members. Even today, the Congregação Cristã takes a very conservative line. It has never developed into a Pentecostal church like the Assembléia de Deus, which makes substantial use of the media to try to attract new members. It is not particularly well known amongst the general public and has little influence on the country's politics.⁶

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The 1950s and 1960s

In the first half of the 20th century, the expansion of Pentecostalism was still quite limited. This is partly due to the fact that new members were almost exclusively attracted by word of mouth propaganda, as the Pentecostal Church at that point wanted to maintain a low public profile. The first significant change to the strategy of many, predominantly newly-formed, Pentecostal churches came about in the 1950s and 1960s. At this time the first large, truly Brazilian Pentecostal congregations were starting to be formed, that is to say those that were started by Brazilians themselves and not by immigrant Europeans or North Americans, as had been the case in the early days.

traditionellem Volksglauben und modernen Erweckungsbewegungen, Frankfurt am Main, 2007, 120 et seq.

6 | For more details on the origins of the Assembléia de Deus and the Congregação Cristã see: Roberto Schuler, *Pfingstbewegungen in Brasilien: Sozio-politische Implikationen der neuen Pluralität*, São Leopoldo, 2004, 50 et sqq.

During this time the Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular (Church of the Foursquare Gospel), which came to Brazil from North America in 1951, played a very important role. This church made use of what were known as tent missions. Instead of having a fixed place of worship, they held their services in tents, which could be quickly erected in different towns and cities, and which attracted a lot of

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curious bystanders on account of the tent walls being so thin that people could hear what was going on inside. One of the most important preachers of the Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular was Manoel de Mello, who had previously been a member of the Assembléia de Deus. He used his popularity to set up his own church in 1956, the Igreja Brasil Para Cristo (Brazil for Christ Church), the first significant, purely Brazilian Pentecostal church.⁷ This pattern of successful and popular preachers, who after a certain period of time felt called to set up their own churches, was repeated more and more often within Pentecostalism, with the result that there are now a huge number of different Pentecostal churches in Brazil.

Member numbers in Pentecostal congregations grew steadily during this time, though not at the rate they are growing today. In 1960, around four per cent of Brazilians were members of one of the churches that came under the umbrella term "Protestant". 93 per cent of the population were still members of the Catholic Church. It was not until 1980 that this number fell under the 90 per cent mark for the first time, and since then it has been dropping with increasing rapidity.⁸

Neo-Pentecostalism

This development started during the third phase of Pentecostal expansion. It was referred to as neo-Pentecostalism and started with the founding of the biggest and most influential Pentecostal church, the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, or Universal or IURD for short) in 1977. This new church had

7 | Further details about the second phase of Pentecostalism in Brazil can be found in Schuler, n. 6, 57 et seq.

8 | Cf. Höllinger, n. 5, 149.

a completely different style compared to its predecessors. Some authors are at great pains to stress the “neo” part of the title and suggest that it was basically a completely new type of church.⁹ The Universal freed itself from the constraints of the traditional stance of the Pentecostal Church, especially in terms of avoiding the use of modern media or trying to exert political influence, and implemented an aggressive expansion strategy. The Church’s founder, Edir Macedo, had learnt the tools of the trade as a successful preacher in a different Pentecostal church, the Igreja de Nova Vida (Church of the New Life).¹⁰ As a loud and rousing preacher, he combines the more spectacular and successful elements of religious services, such as singing, dancing and the casting-out of devils, with a business-like marketing strategy focused on maximising profit and using of every marketing opportunity offered by modern media.¹¹

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The neo-Pentecostal Church has moved away from the strict rules of behaviour espoused by “classic” Pentecostalism. The ban on premarital sex, drugs and alcohol was maintained, but strict codes of dress and the ban on make-up for women, for example, no longer apply. This has helped to somewhat close the gap between Afro-Brazilian folk religions and culture on the one hand and the strict codes of behaviour espoused by the Pentecostal church on the other. This code of conduct is another reason why the neo-Pentecostal Church appeals to more Brazilians than the older Pentecostal churches. Religious services are held seven days a week in huge church buildings, some of which can accommodate several thousand people. Every weekday service has a different theme, in order to address the different lives and needs of a wide range of people. Therefore, one day it might be about financial success, another day about spiritual healing, and the next day

9 | Cf. Martin Norberto Dreher, “Protestantismo Brasileiro – um mundo em mudança”, in: *Estudos Leopoldenses – Série História*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1997, 158.

10 | Cf. Schuler, n. 6, 64 et sqq.

11 | Cf. Nils Handler, “Brasiliens Freikirche macht den Glauben zum Geschäft”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 13, 2010, <http://faz.net/aktuell/religion-brasiliens-freikirche-macht-den-glauben-zum-geschaeft-1998242.html> (accessed December 15, 2011).

about family planning. The services are not just held in church buildings, but some are also televised and shown throughout Brazil. In theory, this means that almost all Brazilians can be reached simultaneously.¹²

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The neo-Pentecostal Church is also not afraid of getting involved in politics. The Pentecostal Church now represents one of the largest non-party factions in the national parliament,¹³ and its growing importance in this area means it can no longer be ignored. The votes of members of the Church can be decisive during elections, and leading politicians are often forced into a balancing act between not risking the votes of supporters of Pentecostalism on the one hand, and not putting too much strain on good and important relations with the country's Catholic Church and the Vatican on the other.

Pentecostal Theology

Neo-Pentecostalism also brought with it a new type of theology. "Prosperity theology" (Teologia da Prosperidade) combined with "spiritual war" (Guerra Espiritual) form the perfect basis for the founding of the new Pentecostalism and for winning the hearts and minds of many people, including members of the traditional churches.¹⁴ The aim of prosperity theology is to achieve material prosperity, which is seen as evidence of the love of God. A strong belief in God, together with positive thinking, will lead to an improvement in standards of living. Belief and trust in God are also manifested through material giving, which means donations to the church. The more money believers donate, the higher the likelihood that God will look favourably upon them and reward them with material wealth.¹⁵ If a believer is not financially successful, it is not their fault, but the fault

12 | Cf. Höllinger, n. 5, 125 et sqq.

13 | Oehrlein, n. 4; note: in the Brazilian parliament, in addition to the party factions, there are groupings of MPs from different parties that have a common interest in a specific area of politics. This is due in part to the weak role played by the parties and the almost total lack of party manifestos in Brazil.

14 | Cf. Magali do Nascimento Cunha, "O crescimento do marketing evan gélico no Brasil – resultado da inserção da doutrina neoliberal no discurso religioso das igrejas evangélicas", in: *Comunicação & política*, tome VI, No. 2 and 3, 1999, 68.

15 | Cf. Höllinger, n. 5, 126 et seq.

of the demons that possess them. These demons, who take over the bodies of innocent people on behalf of the Devil, are responsible for all the ills of the world, including alcoholism and drug addiction, sexism and depression, and lack of career or financial success. The best way to cast out these demons is through baptism in the Holy Spirit, which you can experience when you join a Pentecostal church and then confirm your beliefs by making financial donations. Donating money to the Church is always presented as the best way of improving your own life. The responsibility for a person's fate is passed over to God when money is put in the collection bag. The individual is not responsible for anything bad, because that is the work of demons alone. Many people, especially those living in poverty and despair, seem to find comfort and hope in this theology, and indeed many of the Church's members come from the favelas in the big cities. Since the emergence of neo-Pentecostalism, this theology, which sets so much store on worldly goods and prosperity, has started to become much more attractive than the principles of "classic" Pentecostalism, which sees the absence of worldly goods as the best way to find salvation.¹⁶

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THE REACTION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

These changes in the areas of theology and religious belief in Brazil have also resulted in new movements within the Catholic Church. Since the 1960s, we have seen the emergence of two movements that are often diametrically opposed: the Basic Ecclesial Communities and the Charismatic Renewal.

Liberation Theology and Basic Ecclesial Communities

Around the beginning of the second wave of Pentecostalism, which was especially popular amongst the lower echelons of society, a new movement started up within the

16 | Cf. Brand Arenari and Roberto Dutra Torres Júnior, *Religion und Anerkennung: Affinitäten zwischen neupfingstlicher Bewegung und politischem Verhalten in Brasilien. Das moderne Brasilien. Gesellschaft, Politik und Kultur in der Peripherie des Westens*, Thomas Kühn and Jessé Souza (eds.), Wiesbaden, 2006, 262 et seq.

The aim of liberation theology was to free the poor and disadvantaged from oppression and to provide them with as much human dignity, self-determination and solidarity as possible.

Catholic Church, which addressed the problems of the poor and the disadvantaged in particular. Based on the tenets of liberation theology, Basic Ecclesial Communities were formed in which the organization of community life was left to its members and was not preordained from above. The aim of liberation theology was to free the poor and disadvantaged from oppression and to provide them with as much human dignity, self-determination and solidarity as possible. During the time of the Cold War, this theology rejected the type of communism practised in the Soviet Union but leaned towards the Marxist analysis of capitalism and the neo-Marxist Dependency Theory, and as a result, it was increasingly disowned by the Vatican. While the Catholic Church did offer some protection to the Basic Ecclesial Communities during the military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985, by the end of the dictatorship the conservative wing of the Church finally had its way.¹⁷

With the end of the military dictatorship and the steady growth of Pentecostalism, the number of Basic Ecclesial Communities and their members declined significantly. The main reason for this decline, in addition to the loss of support from the Church authorities and the changing political circumstances, was the fact that the religious political discourse of the communities was felt to be too abstract to really help those poor people who were looking for answers to their acute problems. The spiritual experiences and hope offered by the Pentecostal Church clearly seemed to hold a greater appeal for these people.¹⁸

The Charismatic Renewal Movement

If liberation theology and Pentecostalism are distinct opposites, then the differences between Pentecostalism and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement are much less clearly defined. Here too, the spiritual experience, which finds its ultimate expression in baptism with the Holy Spirit, is a cornerstone of the movement, and sanctification rituals are also practised. The battle between good and

17 | Höllinger, n. 5, 130 et seq.

18 | Cf. *ibid.*, 137.

bad spirits is seen as part of everyday life. In 1973 the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement received official recognition by the Vatican, who saw in it an opportunity to encourage those people who felt drawn to the Pentecostal Church to stay within the Catholic Church.

Some traditional Catholic elements, such as the blessing by the priest and the adoration of the Virgin Mary were maintained by the Charismatic Renewal movement. Like them, the Catholic Church has also increasingly adopted marketing strategies that can be communicated via modern media channels. And like some Pentecostal churches, the Catholic Church now owns its own radio and TV stations in order to spread its message.¹⁹

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THE LARGEST PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES IN BRAZIL

Alongside Brazil's original Pentecostal Church, the *Congregação Cristã*, the country's other main Pentecostal congregations include the *Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular*, the *Igreja Brasil Para Cristo*, the *Igreja Pentecostal Deus é Amor* (God is Love Pentecostal Church), the *Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus* (International Church of God's Grace), the *Igreja Apostólica Renascer em Cristo* (Reborn in Christ Church) and the *Comunidade Evangélica Sara Nossa Terra* (Evangelical Community Sara Our Land). However, the biggest and most influential Churches are the *Assembléia de Deus* and the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*.

Assembléia de Deus

In 2011, the *Assembléia de Deus* celebrated its hundredth anniversary, making it the second-oldest Pentecostal church in Brazil after the *Congregação Cristã*. According to data supplied by the founding Church in the USA that keeps statistics on Assemblies of God all over the world, the Brazilian branch has 22.5 million members, making it the biggest Pentecostal Church in the world.²⁰ The Brazilian

19 | Cf. *ibid.*, 138 et sqq.

20 | *Gnotícias*, "Assembléia de Deus do Brasil é a maior igreja Pentecostal do mundo", <http://noticias.gospelmais.com.br/assembleia-deus-brasil-maior-igreja-pentecostal-mundo-21458.html> (accessed September 7, 2011).

weekly magazine *Veja* estimates the number of members to be somewhat lower, giving a figure of 8.5 million on its website.²¹ As is the case with the other Pentecostal congregations in Brazil, it is difficult to put an accurate figure on their membership, as there is a lack of reliable statistics. The true number probably lies somewhere between these two figures. But there is no doubt that it is the largest Pentecostal denomination in Brazil and probably one of the largest – if not the largest – in the world.

The Assembléia de Deus has a federal structure. The various regions of Brazil have 47 mother churches, known as *ministérios*, which are financially independent of each other. They come together under the umbrella of the Convenção Geral, the general assembly, which lays out the Church's policies and sets theological guidelines. Apart from these 47 *ministérios*, there are also some churches that have over time been excluded from the Convenção Geral but have retained their Assembléia de Deus name and which to a large extent have come together to form the Convenção Nacional.²²

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As a "traditional" Pentecostal church, the Assembl ia de Deus still preaches a conservative and, at times, ascetic way of life. However, it has changed over time and is becoming more and more open to new trends. The other original Pentecostal church, the Congregaç o Crist  continues to promote its very strict teachings and keeps itself apart from politics and all forms of media. With a membership of just under two million,²³ it certainly has large numbers of adherents, but over the hundred years of its existence, it has remained much smaller than the Assembl ia de Deus.

The Assembl ia de Deus is also taking a much more active role in the political arena. Unlike the Congregaç o Crist , it

21 | *Veja on-line*, http://veja.abril.com.br/idade/exclusivo/evangelicos/em_resumo.html#3 (accessed September 6, 2011).

22 | Cf. Martin Hertkorn, *Neue religi se Bewegungen in Brasilien. Konversionen zum Pentecostalismus aus biographischer Sicht*, Berlin, 1996, 15.

23 | *Veja on-line*, n. 21.

has abandoned its original position of political neutrality, in order to stand up to the Catholic Church.

Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus

Of all the many Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil, one of them particularly stands out: the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus. Although it still has fewer members than the Assembléia de Deus, it attracts the most public attention. It is hard to give an accurate membership figure for the Universal. The 2000 census suggested that it had just over two million adherents, while *Veja* estimates the current figure to be in the region of 5.2 million.²⁴ However, the IURD's own news service, *R7*, goes as far as to declare that the Church has 13 million members.²⁵ Here too, the truth probably lies somewhere in between. But it seems to be a fact that the Universal is Brazil's second-largest Pentecostal congregation after the Assembléia de Deus.

The Church's founder and self-proclaimed bishop, Edir Macedo, runs the Universal like a business. By 1984, the Church had already established its own radio station, and in 1989, it also set up three TV channels. During the 1990s, Macedo continued to expand his media network and by the end of the decade, he had around 30 radio stations and 39 TV channels.²⁶ He also set up the Church's own publishing house, which publishes a range of print media. Today the Universal has 62 radio stations and two national TV channels, making it one of the country's biggest media companies, the Rede Record.²⁷

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24 | Ibid.

25 | Quoted from an interview with IURD bishop Romualdo Panceiro, "Grupo Folha repete ataque a evangélicos", *R7 Notícias*, <http://noticias.r7.com/brasil/noticias/grupo-folha-repete-ataque-a-evangelicos-20100620.html> (accessed September 6, 2011).

26 | Leonildo Silveira Campos, "O marketing e as estratégias de comunicação da Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus", *Estudos de Religião*, Ano XII, No. 15, December 1998, 25.

27 | Raphael Thalhammer, "Die neue Evangelikalisierung in Lateinamerika: Fallbeispiel Brasilien. Die Folha Universal und ihre Bedeutung für den Diskurs der Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus", in: *Arbeitspapiere zur Iberoromanischen Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft*, Thomas Bremer, Susanne Schütze and Martina Bender (eds.), No. 1, Halle, 2007, 32.

Edir Macedo is a highly controversial figure in Brazilian society. He certainly has no shortage of entrepreneurial spirit and charisma. However, he has also clearly been involved in some shady dealings, even though some of his supporters argue that the accusations against him are exaggerated. However, they can't deny the fact that Macedo has been indicted for his involvement in the drugs trade and money laundering.²⁸ And accusations that he has been lining his own pockets at the expense of the poor have stirred up particular outrage. These allegations were supported by a video, which came to light in 1995 where

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Macedo was seen in one of his temples in New York counting huge amounts of cash, cavorting on a luxury yacht, and telling a group of pastors that they had to be more forceful in collecting their tithes.²⁹ In this, the Universal invokes the Old Testament³⁰ and the prosperity theology mentioned earlier. In fact, more than half of the Church's members donate a tenth or more of their generally very low incomes to the Church.³¹

Macedo has successfully managed to consolidate the Church's policy of enriching those at the top at the expense of its mainly poor congregation. Other Pentecostal churches are similarly aggressive when it comes to collecting money, but the Universal attracts the bulk of the criticism, probably because it was the first to establish this practice on such a massive scale.³²

MEDIA INFLUENCE

The aggressive media strategy of the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus forced other Pentecostal churches to follow suit. None of the other churches could tap the same potential as the Universal in this respect, but they went

28 | Solveig Flörke, "Spirituelle Ambulanz", in: *Weltsichten*, No. 7, 2010, 43.

29 | Cf. Thalhammer, n. 27, 26.

30 | "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it", *Old Testament*, Malachi 3, 10.

31 | Cf. Thalhammer, n. 27, 28.

32 | Cf. Höllinger, n. 5, 158.

along with the slogan: "If you don't know how to make TV programmes, you'll have an empty church."³³

Nowadays the media and marketing strategies of many Pentecostal churches go beyond the traditional formats of radio and television. A mercado gospel³⁴ has now been in existence for some time and it is growing rapidly. Alongside CDs of gospel music, this market now has "Christian" beauty products "for the devout woman".³⁵ As the number of new believers grows year on year, the "Christian" market is booming. This no longer has anything to do with the original Pentecostal doctrine of asceticism and restraint. Whereas in the past devout women wore skirts that covered their ankles, kept their hair long and never wore make-up, nowadays they can maintain a clear conscience by using products that have God's blessing.

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In this way, the criteria determining what constitutes a devout lifestyle have tipped from one extreme to another in just a few short years. Of course, there are still Pentecostal churches that uphold the old teachings. But the older denominations that are now following neo-Pentecostal trends still retain the same credibility as those that remain true to their original doctrines.

The Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus is once again leading the way in these changes. On their website,³⁶ alongside the latest articles from the various IURD media channels and Bishop Macedo's blog, there is also a link to the online shopping centre, offering merchandise such as t-shirts and CDs, but also a full range of goods including baby products, beauty products, televisions, furnishing, jewellery and much more. These can all be ordered online and paid for by credit card. It is also possible to give a donation towards the construction of a replica of Solomon's Temple that is planned for São Paulo to provide space for Universal's worshippers to hold their services. In light of these developments, it seems that people have hit the nail

33 | Campos, n. 26, 29.

34 | do Nascimento Cunha, n. 14, 69.

35 | Cf. *ibid*, 70.

36 | ArcaUniversal, <http://arcauniversal.com> (accessed December 23, 2011).

on the head when they say that the members of neo-Pentecostal churches are now no longer treated as Christian believers but rather as Christian consumers.³⁷

POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Along with looking at the social influence of the Pentecostal churches via the media, their direct political influence also merits attention. When the Pentecostalism first took root in Brazil, it still followed the strict doctrine that believers should not get involved in politics. It would have been unthinkable to start endorsing political parties from the pulpit, and Church members were not supposed to hold political office. But the advent of the neo-Pentecostal movement and the end of the two decades-long military dictatorship in 1985 led to a radical change in attitudes.

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Even in the 1960s, there were one or two Pentecostal preachers who were elected to sit in the state parliaments and one who joined the national parliament.³⁸ But then the military dictatorship took over, and free national elections were not held again until 1989. Even at that time, the Pentecostal movement had already started to cross over into the mainstream. It had fewer adherents than today, but even so, it was big enough to demand a political voice. As a result, the doctrine that good Christians should not expose themselves to a world of politics that was ruled by demons was abandoned once and for all. The Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus and other neo-Pentecostal churches had few problems breaking with tradition, but even many of the older denominations changed their attitudes towards politics. Of all the evangelical churches, the Assembléia de Deus and the Universal have the most politicians in high-level positions.

Some Pentecostal churches operate like political parties by selecting their front-runners. The Universal uses even an application procedure in order to select “their” candidates

37 | do Nascimento Cunha, n. 14, 69.

38 | Leonildo Silveira Campos, “Os políticos de Cristo – uma análise do comportamento político de protestantes históricos e pentecostais no Brasil”, *Os Votos de Deus. Evangélicos, política e eleições no Brasil*, Joanildo A. Burity et al. (eds.), Recife, 2005, 44.

for elections. Until his involvement in the 2005 corruption scandal, IURD bishop Rodrigues was responsible for running the Church's political apparatus, and he regularly funnelled his church's candidates into political office, and indeed was himself a congressman. After the removal of Rodrigues from political and ecclesiastical office, it is now mainly the senator and IURD bishop Marcelo Crivella, Macedos' nephew, who has taken over the organisation of the Universal's political operations.³⁹

So in the Universal, candidates are selected almost like in political parties and presented to the Church's followers as the first choice and as "God's candidate" – but with the important difference that the Universal, like other churches in the Pentecostal movement, are not run on democratic lines. Decisions are made by a small circle of partly self-proclaimed bishops and influential preachers. Experts see the authoritarian structure of the Pentecostal churches as being one of the main problems when it comes to their involvement in politics.⁴⁰

Experts see the authoritarian structure of the Pentecostal churches as being one of the main problems when it comes to their involvement in politics.

Bancada evangélica

In the national parliament, the evangelical members come together to form a cross-party faction, the *bancada evangélica*. At present, there are 63 representatives in parliament who are at the same time bishops, pastors or hold other offices within the Pentecostal Church, with well over half of them coming from the *Assembléia de Deus*. This makes the evangelical faction one of the largest cross-party factions in Congress today, alongside with the agricultural faction.⁴¹ It has been growing steadily in numbers since the first free elections took place in 1989. Its main goal is the "idea of a new crusade", that should have the effect of "re-Christianizing the world from above".⁴² In this way, it

39 | Cf. Alexandre Brasil Carvalho da Fonseca, "Religion and Democracy in Brazil: A Study of the Leading Evangelical Politicians", in: *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Latin America*, Paul Freston (ed.), New York, 2008, 204.

40 | Cf. Campos, n. 38, 84; Alexandre Brasil Carvalho da Fonseca, "Enfrentando o mal aqui fora: a Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus e sua prática política", in: *Caminhos*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2003, 25.

41 | Oehrlein, n. 4.

42 | Arenari and Torres Júnior, n. 16, 263.

is not only other religions, particularly the Afro-Brazilian folk religions Candomblé and Umbanda, that are portrayed as the enemies of the evangelical churches, but also other Christian churches, above all the Catholics. However – just like other party or cross-party factions in the Brazilian Congress – the *bancada evangélica* finds it impossible to agree on most aspects of daily political life.⁴³

Exercising Influence during Presidential Elections

Whereas the majority of evangelical churches try to exercise their political influence by having as many representatives as possible in parliament, the Universal is particularly interested in gaining direct power within the government. Its ultimate aim is to have the country's president elected from its ranks, and this has been its focus since the 1989 presidential elections. If there are no evangelical candidates with realistic chances of success, then the Universal always supports the candidate with the best chance of being elected president, so that its own people are well positioned when the top political jobs are handed out. So in the 1998 elections, for the first time the Universal aligned itself more closely with Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva. At the time, however, this just served as a bargaining chip against Cardoso, and in the end they supported the latter when he went on to win his second victory in the polls. In the 2002 presidential elections, the Universal came out wholly on the side of Lula. This was a remarkable turnaround for an organisation that had previously declared Lula to be the devil's representative on earth, but it certainly paid off after the elections. Senator José Alencar of the Universal-controlled Liberal Party (PL, which merged with the Partido da República in 2006) was appointed Vice-President by Lula, and he continued to hold this post during Lula's second presidential term.⁴⁴ The state of Rio de Janeiro already had an evangelical Governor in Anthony Garotinho, who was able to take enormous advantage of the support provided by the *Assembléia de Deus* and the Universal during the 1998 elections, despite

If there are no evangelical candidates with realistic chances of success, then the Universal always supports the candidate with the best chance of being elected president.

43 | Cf. Fonseca, n. 39, 190.

44 | For more details on the 1989-2002 presidential campaigns, see Campos, n. 38, 66 et sqq.

being himself a member of a Presbyterian church.⁴⁵ Supporting Garotinho paid off for various reasons, one of which was his introduction of welfare programmes in Rio de Janeiro state. The funding of these programmes was decided by a network of church representatives, most of them coming from the ranks of the Pentecostals.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

In the course of its more than 100-year history, Pentecostalism in Brazil has increasingly been able to exert its influence on society, politics and the business sphere. It has grown particularly rapidly over the last 20 years, and, from being a religious minority, it has become the country's second largest denomination after the Catholic Church. By mixing elements of Christian services with popular rituals from the Afro-Brazilian folk religions, such as communal chanting and dancing, trance states and encounters with spirits, and through its prosperity theology, the Pentecostal movement has found itself a concept that is, quite literally, a "best-seller" in Brazil.

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For many years now, the sphere of the main Pentecostal denominations has gone way beyond their physical churches and members. To some extent, they operate like businesses, and they use the media to exert a strong influence on society. Some of them own national TV stations and publish high-circulation newspapers. Their direct influence on politics has also increased steadily. Many members of the state parliaments and the National Congress also hold positions in the Pentecostal churches. The churches have not yet succeeded in getting one of their members directly elected to the highest political positions, but they have been able to use their close ties with certain politicians to exercise significant indirect political influence for the benefit of their own clientele. The Pentecostals are particularly powerful in the favelas, which receive little assistance from the Brazilian welfare state. In many areas that are

45 | Cf. Fonseca, n. 39, 169.

46 | Cf. Campos Machado, *Política e Religião. A participação dos evangélicos nas eleições*, Rio de Janeiro, 2006, 59 et seq.

ruled by the drug gangs, the only safe way of getting out of the drug trade is to join one of the Pentecostal churches, as this is deemed acceptable by the gangs. In contrast, other churches or religions are being squeezed out – sometimes violently.⁴⁷

The image of the Pentecostal Church is therefore something of a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it is often stressed that it provides its members with a sense of stability and direction. The strict ban on alcohol and drugs, the feeling of belonging to a strong community, and the inclusion of certain rituals from the Afro-Brazilian animist religions that can turn spiritual experiences into a state of religious ecstasy – all these elements can help the Church's followers to feel they have the power to break out of the vicious circle of poverty and despair. On the other hand, however, Church members have to pay a high monetary price for this; money that is not only reinvested in social projects but which also goes to line the pockets of the Church's leaders, who are often not whiter-than-white, despite expecting this of their congregations. The most extreme example of this must surely be that of the founder of the Universal, Edir Macedo.

It is also necessary to take a critical look at Pentecostal involvement in politics. There is no doubt that some Pentecostal churches represent a significant proportion of the Brazilian population, thanks to their large number of followers. Nevertheless, it has to be asked to what extent these churches actually represent the political will of their members, as their decision-making structures tend to be highly authoritarian. What is more, the Pentecostals' intolerance towards other religious groups and their goal of "re-Christianising" society is hardly in line with modern, secular democracy.

47 | Cf. Samuel Lima et al., *Thank God*, <http://rioonwatch.org/?p=1151> (accessed December 6, 2011).