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Shifting Christian Identities in Brazil: What the Numbers (Do Not) Show

Rodrigo Franklin de Sousa

It is a well-known fact that statistical data demand interpretation. Religion researchers are tasked with converting numbers into a coherent narrative that tells the story of the movement of religions, and movement between religions, within society. Two issues invite our attention in the present contribution: the diverse Christian matrix of Brazil, and the relation of the decline in Roman Catholic membership and the increase in Evangelical membership in the country.¹ Recent statistics, combined with an investigation of the Brazilian religious scene, indicate that we are witnessing a progressive transformation of Brazilian Christian identity.

The Numbers of Christians in Brazil

The primary source of statistical data about religion in Brazil is the national census, which is carried out every 10 years by the National Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, in Portuguese). The latest census occurred in 2010. The census gathers information about every aspect of Brazilian life, including religion.² According to the latest census, the Brazilian population currently numbers 190,755,799 people. This indicates a significant growth from the 169,799,170 of the 2000 census.

Different from the method normally found in censuses of Western countries, the Brazilian census questionnaire does not present respondents with a set of previously established categories from which they must choose the option that best describes their religious affiliation. In the IBGE system, the respondent can answer this question rather freely, as responses are given orally to the agent who then fills out the form in a quasi-'interview' style. All answers are sorted into separate categories. In the 2010 census, the Institute organized answers into 66 categories of religious affiliation, collected in larger

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- 1 The term 'Evangelical' appears here in the sense adopted in the national census, denoting a denomination that is directly or indirectly connected with Protestantism, without reference to specific doctrinal positions. The important debates surrounding the theme will not affect the current discussion.
 - 2 The gathering of data for the census occurs by research visits and interviews by field agents in every house in the country, over the course of several months. In 2010, it involved the work of 191,000 agents who visited 67.6 million homes in each of the 5,565 Brazilian municipalities.

umbrella groups (Mafra 2014: 33–4). For instance, Evangelicals are divided into three major groups: ‘Mission,’ ‘Pentecostal,’ and ‘Non-Defined.’ The first group, Mission Evangelicals, is subdivided into 7 subgroups: Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Adventists, and others. The second is subdivided into 12 subgroups.

The religious landscape of Brazil is dominated by Christianity, as nearly 90% of the Brazilian population is affiliated to some form of Christian expression. The dominance of Christianity is highlighted by the fact that the combined number of practitioners of all other world religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism—adds to less than 1% of the total population. It is quite significant that none of these groups have experienced any remarkable change in numbers over the past few censuses. The largest group after Christianity in Brazil is that of the ‘non-religious,’ or ‘religiously unaffiliated,’ which includes 15,335,510 people, or 8.04% of the total population. This group has experienced some growth, as in 2000 it numbered 12,492,403, or 7.35% of all Brazilians.³

Christian groups in Brazil display great internal diversity that corresponds to specific historical, cultural, and social factors. Christianity in Brazil is a dynamic affair and has the potential to challenge what is reported in the census. To explore some of the shifts occurring within this broad group, we first look at table 8.1, which presents the Catholic and Evangelical affiliation of this population in the last two censuses: 2000 and 2010.

TABLE 8.1 *Christian affiliation in Brazil, 2000 and 2010*

Religion	Pop. 2000	% of total pop.	Pop. 2010	% of total pop.
Roman Catholics	124,980,132	73.6	123,280,172	64.63
Brazilian Catholics	500,582	0.29	560,781	0.29
Orthodox Catholics	38,060	0.02	131,521	0.06
Evangelicals (total)	26,184,941	15.42	42,275,440	22.16
Mission Ev.	6,939,765	4.09	7,686,827	4.03
Pentecostal Ev.	17,617,307	10.38	25,370,484	13.3
Non-defined Ev. ⁴	1,627,870	0.96	9218129	4.83
Total population	169,799,170	100.0	190,755,799	100.0

DATA SOURCE: IBGE 2010.

3 In 2000, the group ‘non-religious’/‘without religion’ was counted as a single category. In 2010 this group was divided into ‘without religion,’ ‘agnostic,’ and ‘atheist.’

4 In 2000, Evangelicals were divided in ‘Mission,’ ‘Pentecostal,’ and ‘Without Institutional Affiliation.’ The latter group was in turn subdivided in ‘Evangelicals,’ ‘Evangelicals of Pentecostal origin,’ and ‘Other Evangelicals.’ This represents an attempt to see the group of unaffiliated Evangelicals in relation to the mission and Pentecostal groups. This confusing classification was simplified in 2010 with changing the categories to ‘Mission,’ ‘Pentecostal,’ and ‘Non-Determined.’

Our analysis focuses only on the Roman Catholic and Evangelical churches. Other groups broadly affiliated with Christianity, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Brazilian Spiritism, are not considered, as their numbers are very small and did not present any significant variation over the latest censuses.⁵

The Diverse Character of Brazilian Christianity

Brazilian Catholicism is, as one would expect, very diverse. In it we find beliefs and practices that cover the broad range of the Catholic Church in general, as well as the incorporation of elements from other forms of religiosity (see Pereira 2012). The census distinguishes between three Catholic denominations: Roman, Brazilian, and Orthodox.⁶ Only the Roman Catholic concerns us here. It is worth noting that the numbers in the other two denominations may suggest that they account for part of the mass exodus from the Roman Catholic Church.

We can now turn to the three groups within the Evangelical camp. The first is 'Mission Evangelicalism.' This label includes different types of Protestant and Evangelical denominations, and represents 4.09% of all Brazilians. Mission Evangelicalism includes historical Protestant churches such as Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists. Some of these denominations, like the Lutherans, established themselves in Brazil via immigration, while others are the direct result of intentional missionary work, and in most cases from the activity of missionaries from the United States. Mission-founded denominations maintain complex and dynamic relationships with their churches of origin, and we can detect different degrees of acceptance and resistance to American influence. While there is virtually no financial dependence on churches in the United States, American Evangelicalism still has great influence in terms of theology and ideology, as well as in providing models of organization and management.

The second group in the IBGE classification system is 'Pentecostals.' This is an even broader and more complex group, encompassing over 13.3% of the religious population. It includes traditional Pentecostal churches, such as the Assemblies of God—which is a name designating at least eight different denominations—and the *Congregação Cristã do Brasil* (Christian Congregation of Brazil).

Also counted in the census along with Pentecostals are the so-called Neo-Pentecostal groups, most notably the indigenous Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. Neo-Pentecostal churches differ in many aspects both from Missional and Pentecostal

5 The census also lists a group identified as 'Other Christians,' which has grown from 235,532 (0.13%) in 2000 to 1,461,495 (0.77%) in 2010. There are, however, issues surrounding this label so that it should be a matter for further research.

6 The Brazilian Catholic Church is a dissident group that questions several points in Roman Catholic teaching, such as papal infallibility and the requirement of celibacy for clerics. Orthodox Catholics, also known as Eastern-rite Catholics, include groups such as Greek, Russian, and Armenian churches.

churches. They do not follow traditional models of structure, participation, or theology like the older Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. This generates a different sense of belonging and of participation within communities. These differences are significant and need to be taken into account, especially as one tries to make sense of the current religious landscape and of the relationship between religion and society in Brazil.

In a sense, these are the churches that best represent the impact of late modernity upon religion. While there is a broad range of perspectives and terminologies to characterize contemporary societies—as seen in the variety of terms like postmodernity, ultra-modernity, and liquid modernity—there is a general sense that our age is marked primarily by the radical reconfiguration of identity, individuality, and belonging, as well as by profound transformations in the production and consumption of economic and cultural goods (see Anderson 1998). This reconfiguration has greatly impacted every religious denomination, particularly Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal churches (see Berger 2014: 61–63).

Something similar can be said about the third Evangelical group according to the IBGE census, namely, that of 'Non-Defined' Evangelicals. This is a new group that today surpasses those affiliated with a Mission Evangelical church. In general terms, the label designates those who circulate between different groups without belonging to a specific community. This phenomenon is called by specialists 'religious transit' (see Bitun 2010).

The Changing Landscape

The most significant shifts in the Brazilian religious scenario are the progressive decrease in membership of the Catholic Church and the parallel growth of Evangelicalism. Both of these trends are nuanced and multifaceted phenomena, and there are no easy or simple explanations for either.

Since 1872, when official data on religion began to be collected by the Brazilian authorities, all the numbers indicated a slow but steady decline in Catholic affiliation. Starting at 99.7% in 1872, by 1990 Catholics represented 83.0% of the Brazilian population. In 2000, the number dropped to 73.6%, and by 2010 to 64.6%. The most significant fall occurred between 2000 and 2010, with a decrease of 2.2 million members, from 125.5 million to 123.3 million (Steil and Toniol 2014: 19).

The numbers in the last three censuses represent a decline of nearly 10% in Catholic membership per decade. Obviously, this trend reveals significant transformations in Brazilian society and culture. There is a correlation between the fall in Catholic numbers and the growth of Evangelicalism, but this is not the only explanation, as not all Catholics are migrating to Evangelical churches. More than anything else, these numbers are to be taken more in the sense of a shifting perception of Brazilian identity.

The connection between Catholicism and Brazilian culture and identity has always been profound. Being the religion that the Portuguese brought to the colony, since the

country's inception Catholicism became a very significant part of the social, cultural, and political makeup of the population. This identification has been challenged in recent years with the steady decline of membership within the Church. This points both to a process of reconfiguration of the Brazilian religious landscape and to a rupture in the association between Catholicism and Brazilian identity. Being Brazilian no longer necessarily means being Catholic, as it did in the past.

Yet there is a very interesting aspect of this shifting picture that needs to be taken into account that is hidden by the IBGE survey. Paradoxically, and contrary to what common sense would lead us to conclude on the basis of the census' numbers alone, the Catholic Church, as an institution, has also *grown* exponentially in the last decades in Brazil.

A recent study by Carlos Steil and Rodrigo Toniol, utilizing data from IBGE and the Center of Religious Statistics and Social Investigation (CERIS, in Portuguese; Steil & Toniol 2014), indicates that there has been a notable growth in the number of priests and parishes. In fact, the last few decades witnessed the establishment of the highest ratio of priests per inhabitants in Brazilian history. Catholics are diminishing, but the Catholic Church is growing (Steil and Toniol 2014: 19). Since the 1990s, the number of parishes has grown from 7,786 to 10,270, which represents an increase of nearly 40% in 16 years. As for the number of priests, from the 1980s to 2010, the number has increased from 12,688 to 22,119, representing a growth of over 60% (Steil and Toniol 2014: 20–21). In 1980, there were 8,447 Catholic members per priest. In 2010, there were only 5,570 (Steil and Toniol 2014: 23).

Steil and Toniol explain this paradox by arguing that lay men and women have a more significant role to play in the propagation of the faith than priests and the institutional machine. As the religious landscape has become increasingly multifaceted and plural, and more options appear before lay people in other religious segments, they are attracted to it. The Catholic Church's insensibility to this trend and continued emphasis on institutional and bureaucratic growth tends to alienate lay people even further, weakening their role as agents of the propagation of the Catholic faith (Steil and Toniol 2014: 22).⁷

Though the authors do not push this case further, there seems to be an implicit echo of an often made argument, namely, that affiliation to Pentecostal churches grows due to the opportunities that they foster for personal engagement, leadership, and the acquiring of social capital (see Petersen 2004). This is certainly a valid explanation *in some cases*. While it is true that opportunities for engagement and personal advancement are more readily available in Pentecostal churches, these opportunities take different shapes in different settings. Moreover, the churches that grow more rapidly are the Neo-Pentecostal ones, which follow a totally different system of participation and belonging. A brief discussion of this paradigm shift is in order.

7 The authors argue that this point is strengthened by the attestation that the number of ordained nuns has also decreased steadily in the same period.

Shifting Identities in Brazilian Christianity

Both Catholics and Evangelicals in Brazil have experienced profound changes in their sense of identity and belonging. Many factors contribute to this, but certainly one of the most significant is the subsuming of religion under a logic of markets and consumerism. For this reason, many have studied religion under the rubric of terms that are analogous to those used in economics, such as 'offer and demand,' 'market of religious goods,' and so on.⁸

If the sense of natural identification between being Brazilian and Catholic is waning, it is also true that the notion of church belonging is shifting in Evangelicalism. The ways in which postmodernity in particular reconfigures religious sentiment and the notion of belonging have generated much attention (see Knebelkamp 2003; Willaime 2006). It is known that in mission churches, belonging to a community has always been connected to the notion of church membership, whose origins go back to the very foundations of the modern world, in the form of gathering in voluntary associations (see Mouw and Griffioen 1993). Historically, Protestants have filled their churches by means of various strategies of proselytism that have the goal of including new members in the community. The maintenance of these members in the same community is regulated by diverse practices such as frequency control, pastoral visits, participation in church groups and activities, discipleship, and tithing. The latter practice is especially significant. In the spirit of voluntary associations, tithing is perceived as one of the most important forms of contributing to the maintenance of the group, and is an important tool of identity construction.

In these traditional communities, the counterpart of belonging is exclusion. The rupture between individuals and congregations and within congregations results from different kinds of breaks in mutuality, such as the lack of agreement in ritual or belief, or failure to abide by the standards of the community. In such ruptures, congregants will look for different environments that offer a greater sense of identification.

The sense of belonging in Neo-Pentecostal churches represents a significant portion of the IBGE Pentecostal category and is constructed in very different terms. These churches have become progressively distant from the model of voluntary associations and have acquired contours that are typical of the individualism and consumerism that characterize late modernity.⁹ This is further complicated by the large numbers of non-defined Evangelicals, whose sense of belonging and identity is even more difficult to ascertain.

A significant issue is the abandonment of the sense of personal participation and of the responsibility of each member to contribute to the maintenance of the group. Instead, there is a pronounced distinction between two types of people: on one side,

8 This type of analysis was initially proposed by authors such as Max Weber, Peter Berger, and Pierre Bourdieu. A representative study appears in Stark 2001.

9 In Brazil, these studies have developed since the publication of Campos 1997.

a class of professionals (in Weberian terms) in charge of providing religious goods and, on the other, churchgoers who benefit from these goods, which often take the form of healing, material blessings, or other perceived 'spiritual' benefits.

In this scenario, every aspect of religious life is affected. To think of one example, we note that while in historical churches tithing is believed to be a sign of faithfulness to God connected to an ideal of voluntarism, in these new contexts, tithing is a sign of faithfulness to God connected to unimpeded access to the spiritual goods provided by church workers. In short, tithing ceases to be perceived as community duty and instead becomes a personal investment.

As the sense of belonging changes, so does the sense of not-belonging. Distancing oneself from a specific church no longer needs to be connected to a sense of exclusion from a community. Rather, since community is not necessarily a key element of these new forms of Christianity, the movement between congregations or denominations can be described as a search for environments that are more congenial to specific demands at a given time. In a sense, there is neither belonging nor exclusion.

Some Prospects

The observations made above have some significant implications. In the face of changing perceptions of belonging and identity, it is difficult to interpret the real meaning of the numbers offered by the IBGE census and other mechanisms. But we can offer some prospects.

First, the paradox between the progressive decrease of membership in the Catholic Church and the increase in the number of priests and parishes points to a disconnect between an institution still relying on traditional forms of organizing and propagating religion and a population increasingly detached from these forms. The Catholic population is going through a process of reconfiguration of identities and relationship with religiosity, and the Church has not yet processed this.

Second, the exodus from Catholicism to Evangelicalism is not necessarily connected to an impulse toward affiliation and greater involvement in a specific religious community. In light of recent developments within the Evangelical camp, it is likely that Brazilian Catholics are also rethinking their religious identities and sense of belonging, so that the exodus is motivated by the quest for more 'satisfying' religious goods provided by other institutions.

If these two theses are correct, it is possible to foresee some tendencies. Most likely, membership in the Catholic Church will continue to decline, although it is uncertain whether this drop will be as steep and significant as that registered in the last two IBGE censuses. Also, among Evangelicals, the non-defined group is the one that will continue to present the most significant growth, followed closely by Pentecostals. Moreover, it is likely that the non-religious group will continue to grow steadily.

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