



**RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM AND IMPERIALISM
IN LATIN AMERICA: ACTION AND RESISTANCE**



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The art in this dossier reimagines photographs that, as the authors write, 'recover the voices and resistance, from the past and the present, that have confronted religious fundamentalism in Latin America'. These images recover the various spaces and ways in which Christianity is present in the lives of the Latin American people as a form of resistance.

COVER

Participants of a march and vigil organised by the Love Conquers Hate Christian Collective light candles during a prayer with believers of various faiths in Rio de Janeiro in 2018, 'joined together for the same values: life, liberty and the defence of human dignity as Christ taught us', they declared.

Reference photograph by Gabriel Castilho

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Reference photograph: *Sandinistas at the Walls of the National Guard Headquarters: 'Molotov Man', Estelí, Nicaragua, July 16th, 1979*, by Susan Meiselas/Magnum Photos

‘Neither reason nor science can satisfy all the need of the infinite that exists in man’.

– José Carlos Mariátegui¹

Introduction

It is impossible to disconnect religion from the political projects of domination and liberation in Latin America. Since the era of colonisation, some movements have used religion to oppress, abuse, and enslave people, while others have used religion to organise and liberate them. Today, the advance of religion and religious rhetoric in institutional politics in Latin America has become a significant trend. An ever-greater number of believers, be they progressives or reactionaries, have worked to spread their beliefs, demands, and projects in daily religious life and in the public sphere.

The overwhelming majority of Latin Americans are Christian, including over 80% of the population across the region (Catholic and evangelical combined) and over 90% of the population in countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Peru. All countries in the region have a population that is at least 50% Christian (with the exception of Uruguay, where the figure is 44%), and in many countries there is a shift from Catholicism to forms of Protestantism. Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras have currently narrowed the gap between the number of Catholics and evangelicals; meanwhile,

El Salvador, Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Bolivia all have populations that are at least 20% evangelical. This percentage is even higher in working-class areas.²

Habits and practices of faith are crucial to the everyday life of Latin America's working class. Churches, temples, *terreiros** (yards), and prayer houses are part of the people's culture; here, they find reception, a sense of community, and the possibility of collectively living out their spirituality. On a continent marked by the legacy of colonialism, social forms of all kinds – including religion – have provided refuge and the basis for resistance. Religion is not only intrinsic to people's daily lives, but also to their struggles and revolutions.

However, since neoliberalism began to advance in Latin America, the right wing has grown in both political and social spheres. This process is reflected not only in the withdrawal of rights from the working class, but also in discourses that seek to weaken democratic institutions. Religious fundamentalism is an instrument used to maintain this neoliberal project by fixating on the idea that there is only a single, immutable, and unquestionable truth. In other words, it is anti-dialogical and anti-pluralistic and strongly idealises a past that never existed. This absolute and dogmatic ideology extends well beyond religion: it also shapes political, economic, and social life.

This dossier synthesises the research of the Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research (Brazil) working group on evangelism, politics,

* Translator's note: Terreiros are places where rituals for Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions take place.

and grassroots organising. Examining the history of Christianity and growth of religious fundamentalism in Latin America, with Brazil as a primary case study, the text traces the development of religious fundamentalism from its origins up to its contemporary form and its insertion into regional politics, where it seeks to further misogynist, anti-communist, and anti-democratic agendas as well as imperialist projects on the continent. On the other hand, we also recover the voices and resistance, from the past and the present, that have confronted religious fundamentalism in Latin America. Inspired by the revolutionary practices of Latin America's many martyrs and influenced by the teachings of the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda and Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, this dossier is based on interviews with working-class educators and with members of popular movements' evangelical base.





Members of the Gullah community in Georgia (United States) participate in a 'ring shout' during a service in a 'praise house', ca. 1930s.

Reference photograph: *Doing the Ring Shout in Georgia*, photographer unknown, sourced from the Lorenzo Dow Turner Papers, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

Religious Fundamentalism and Its Origins

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Christian theology as a field of study was marked by various advances in thought and methods of investigation that were strongly influenced by the European Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These perspectives held practical implications; for example, the so-called Social Gospel sought to provide a theological response to the reality faced by the urban working class in large cities in the United States after the crisis and economic transformations of the War of Secession (1861–1865).*

With the advance of modern science and the development of scientific forms of reading (such as hermeneutics for Biblical study), it became necessary to ground the study of the Bible in its historical context and to interpret the mystical language it at times employs. The historical-critical method questioned the literal interpretation of the Bible and gave new meaning to the figure of Jesus and to biblical stories by emphasising their ethical and moral value rather than focusing on a metaphysical analysis. The movement that adopted this approach came to be known as liberal theology.

* The War of Secession, or the American Civil War, took place in the United States between the states of the North and those of the South from 1861 to 1865. This conflict began when the southern states seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America. The War of Secession was motivated by the differences between the two groups regarding the abolition of slavery and the expansion of new territories that were being occupied to the west.

It was in this historical context, reacting to the new meanings that were being offered by liberal theology, that religious fundamentalism emerged in the form of conservative Protestant groups that opposed this new, scientific way of seeing the world. Beginning with the publication of twelve volumes entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* between 1910 and 1915, this movement argued that certain elements in the Christian faith were non-negotiable. This publication was financed by the Presbyterian billionaire Lyman Stewart, organised by the Reverend Reuben Archer Torrey, and distributed throughout the US and other English-speaking countries. Roughly three million copies were put into the hands of believers, theologians, and missionaries, free of cost.³

Religious fundamentalism was therefore born as an antagonistic reaction to science, humanism, and the values of modernity that emerged from the Enlightenment, which it saw as an enemy to be combatted. This project's vision was closely linked to the idea of 'Manifest Destiny', which developed in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century and held that the conquest of the American West by US colonisers was God's wish. This idea was taken up and adapted by the Christian right in the second half of the twentieth century, which used it to justify US imperialist action around the world, including in Latin America.

The US imperialist project is intimately linked to this fundamentalist religious vision, which asserts that believers have been sent by God to 'civilise' the 'barbarians'. US Protestantism has been used as a religious justification for the country's imperialist actions. It is not possible, in any analysis, to separate imperialism from religious

fundamentalism, whose followers see their struggle as a war of good against evil that cuts across not only religion but also politics, military power, education, and the environment. As a result, the movement inserts itself into the world and into the daily lives of workers, actively positioning itself against its opponents in various contexts well beyond the religious realm. The Protestant maxim ‘convert the individual and society will change’ sheds light on this approach and the perceived importance of winning over new believers: no longer is it just individual sin that must be purged, but the sins of all nations.

Furthermore, fundamentalists see the attainment of wealth as a Protestant duty, and their interpretation of the Bible asserts that faith and discipline will lead to prosperity for believers, above all financially. Poverty is therefore understood as a reflection of a lack of faith and lack of discipline. Prosperity theology, strongly associated with neo-Pentecostalism, has been intimately linked to conservative Protestantism since the start of the twentieth century.

However, to the Black, immigrant, and impoverished workers in the US who attended Protestant churches at the beginning of the twentieth century, this view would not have made sense. This ‘inadequacy’ of a Protestantism of wealth is at the root of Pentecostalism, whose origin lies in the Azusa Street Movement in 1906 in Los Angeles. According to the testimony of the Black preacher William J. Seymour, poor, Black, and immigrant followers had cathartic and spiritual experiences that incorporated their ‘Africanity’, or African identity, expressed through their bodies and their songs. This liturgical Africanity carried with it the legacy of rituals practiced by

enslaved Africans: ring shouts, dances, clapping, speaking in tongues (glossolalia), and emotion that overflows in celebration and worship.

Pentecostalism, in its own way, dignified marginalised people who were experiencing socioeconomic and racial tensions during that period in the US and promoted gender equality in its leadership. Through the practice of faith, a collective identity was created that served as a means of dealing with certain forms of individual suffering: alcoholism, psychosocial anguishes, and violence and conflict in the home. Pentecostalism was born, therefore, as a form of resistance by Black people in the United States and a desire to live out their spirituality in dialogue with their ancestors, something that was not found in the discourse and liturgy of white Protestantism.

Pentecostal Protestants encountered difficulties practicing their faith in conventional, institutional forms, facing resistance from traditional fundamentalist US Protestantism. However, in the 1960s, fundamentalists became more similar to the Pentecostals in order to win back the influence that they had lost among working-class believers. This phenomenon cannot be understood without recognising the role played by the Baptist pastor Billy Graham in the late 1940s. Graham, a well-known pastor and preacher, held the conviction that 'America's destiny' depended on the ability to convert individuals to a form of Christianity that followed a fundamentalist reading of the Bible. In an effort to reform early twentieth century fundamentalism, he created the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, which had a strongly expansionist impulse, extensive financial support for campaigns in Latin America, and an alliance with dictatorships on the continent. This was accompanied by a popular and mass-oriented

approach to anti-communism, attacking communists on the basis of moral concerns, defending the patriarchal family, and arguing that Christians should mobilise to further this objective. Graham became a personal advisor to US presidents such as Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush and was even offered the ambassadorship to Israel by former President Nixon.

Although religious fundamentalism was not born in Pentecostal churches, it is important to mention that, as much as the Pentecostal movement broke with some forms of oppression, the centrality of points considered to be traditional in the Christian faith were maintained and exploited in the course of time in this strategic link between fundamentalism and Pentecostalism. As such, fundamentalism, allied with an imperialist project, was able to take on a new religious form. The traditional Christian right saw in Pentecostalism a strategic opportunity, which it used to bring theological and expansionist elements to various parts of the Global South.

We can therefore conclude that one of the characteristics of fundamentalism is its reactionary character. However, to advance our understanding of new fundamentalist narratives that have emerged since the expansion of Pentecostalism, we must better understand the religious elements that began to take shape in Latin America during this period.



Liberation theologian Frei Betto and Cuban leader Fidel Castro during a twenty-three-hour interview in Havana later published in Betto's book, *Fidel and Religion: Conversations with Frei Betto*, 1985.

Reference photograph by Alex Castro, sourced from Frei Betto's personal archive via *Fidel and Religion*, Fontonar Press.

Christianity and Politics in Latin America

A history of authoritarianism, colonialism, slavery, and imperialism, as well as animosity towards the emergence of revolutionary currents driven by the Cuban Revolution of 1959, paved the way for Latin American dictatorships to spread with force beginning in the 1960s. Meanwhile, a Christian movement mobilised against these forms of oppression on the continent, combining Marxist analytical tools with religious faith to shape a God of liberation. Emerging in the 1960s, liberation theology constructed an ideology and practice to guide the struggle of the poor and oppressed against injustice rooted in a reading of the Bible that emphasised a historical, emancipatory Jesus.

Liberation theology arose as a response from various popular organisations in a period when industrialisation was advancing throughout the region, peasant masses were being proletarianised, and structural social inequalities were deepening. We cannot understand the advance of grassroots work in Latin America without understanding the popular, revolutionary Christianity that took root there. Liberation theology's new proposal for the Christian faith centred the poor and marginalised and was groundbreaking in its readings of the Bible. Its method is made up of three key components. First, *reality*: living amongst the people, learning what they know, and being one with them; second, *the Bible*: which it brings into dialogue with daily life, into reality and the search for answers; and third, *community*: sharing bread and life through the communitarian transformation of reality.

As Gustavo Gutiérrez, a founder of liberation theology, outlined, its new proposal became essential ‘to understand the mechanisms of oppression of the prevailing social order’ in order to carry out a ‘radical break from the current state of things, a profound transformation of the private property system [and] of the exploited class’s access to power, and a social revolution that would break this dependence and allow for the change to a new society, a socialist society’.⁴

Through liberation theology, faith and struggle have gone hand in hand in Latin America. Among the many examples of the close ties between resistance and Christianity on the continent are:

- Nicaragua, where Christians, influenced by liberatory actions throughout the continent, were essential in the Sandinista Revolution and the struggle for national liberation.
- El Salvador, where Christian movements on the continent inspired a greater commitment to the poor. In particular, it is important to mention the teachings of Father Rutilio Grande (1928–1977) and his methodology of a critical and popular reading of the Bible and the example of the Popular Revolutionary Bloc, led by the young Christian Juan Chacón (1952–1980).⁵
- Colombia, where the Catholic priest, sociologist, and guerrilla Camilo Torres Restrepo (1929–1966) called for an ‘effective love’ for one’s neighbour and defied and condemned the Church, claiming that it had been corrupted by the powerful.

- Brazil, where the pastoral work of Catholic and Lutheran churches was essential to the formation of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST).⁶

There have also been a number of important Protestant figures in liberation theology. For example, Richard Shaull (1919–2002), known as the ‘theologian of the revolution’, was a US Presbyterian theologian who lived in Brazil for many decades, dedicated his studies to the dialogue between Christianity and Marxism, and brought together social issues and the evangelical faith. Rubem Alves (1933–2014), a student of Shaull’s, coined the term ‘liberation theology’ in his doctoral thesis.⁷ In addition, figures such as the Mexican theologian and biblist Elsa Támara (1951–), the Argentinian Marcella Althaus-Reid (1952–2009), and the Brazilian activist in the Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*, or CPT) Nancy Cardoso (1959–) have deepened our understanding of the body and sexuality through a feminist theology that critiqued liberation theology.

However, the way of being in the world advocated by liberation theology – actively and concretely participating in the struggles for justice – was unacceptable to the forces of imperialism and their allies. In liberation theology, they saw a threat to their interests and the established order, and so, they set out to destroy it.



Neighbourhood residents and other guests participate in a popular bible study in Petrolina, in the state of Pernambuco, 2019.

Reference photograph sourced from the Popular Communication Centre

The Battle of Subjectivity

Across Latin America, the Christian conservative movement joined forces with the imperialist offensive against liberation theology. As Vijay Prashad, director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research, writes, ‘Protestant sects, particularly those with US roots [...] preached the Gospel of individual enterprise, not social justice’.⁸ The slogan *haz patria, mata un cura* – ‘be a patriot, kill a priest’ – was taken at its word in El Salvador, for example, while in Bolivia, the country’s intelligence services, together with the CIA, assembled dossiers on theologians of liberation in the 1970s.

US imperialist strategy took many forms, from supporting coups and dictatorships to intervening in elections and seeking to foment opposition to popular organisations. The US government sought closer relations with the Catholic Church in the 1980s as its head, Pope John Paul II, intervened in the Nicaraguan Revolution and criticised progressive priests. In their internal documents, the CIA emphasised the need to take this battle onto the field of subjectivity; that is, they sought to shape the way in which people constructed meaning of their lives in the wretched context of dependent capitalism.

In this context, the alliance between Pentecostalism and religious fundamentalism gave rise to what became known as neo-Pentecostalism, a faith that grew steadily in the 1980s and 1990s before rapidly expanding from the 2000s onwards. The boom of neo-Pentecostalism strengthened the advance of imperialism and neoliberalism through

the faith's various tendencies, namely the theology of domination and the prosperity gospel.

The theology of domination, or reconstructionism, emerged in the US in the 1970s and sought the reconstruction of theocracy, offering a Christian cosmology that would help evangelicals gain and hold power in the public sphere. This current is closely associated with the idea of 'spiritual war', a struggle against an enemy that can act in various areas of life. This idea was linked to a reading of the Old Testament which contended that Christians should no longer avoid the world – a theological given in earlier forms of Pentecostalism – and all the evil within it, such as sin and temptation; rather, they should exist in the world in an active sense, in a war against evil, including by occupying seats of power.

Meanwhile, the so-called prosperity gospel sees the accumulation of material goods as a sign of divine blessing. Although this thinking gained force among neo-Pentecostals, it is rooted in classical Protestantism, according to which glimpses of God's blessings can also be reflected in the here and now, be it through financial prosperity, recompense for discipline and the Protestant work ethic, or other means.

The church's fundamentalist ideas have resonated with a working class that has been put on the defensive by neoliberal assaults on livelihood and social life as well as by the fragmentation of working-class culture and revolutionary organisations. The process of deindustrialisation and the restructuring of the world of work, in which factories had provided workers with a space to organise collectively to improve

their quality of life, caused many workers to lose not only their jobs, but also their space for sociability and collective struggle. The church responded to this need for socialisation by transforming collective questions into individual ones, promoting a new working-class identity which centred one's status as a believer, and removing, from an economic and ideological point of view, the centrality of the organised proletariat as a revolutionary subject.

With the help of fundamentalist churches, which linked the idea of good luck to dedication and bad luck to a lack of faith, neoliberalism normalised poverty and attributed it to misfortune. The discrediting of the socialist vision of revolution as the means to overcome exploitation and oppression weakened the ability of the working class and peasantry to put economic and political questions at the centre of their analysis of the present. Instead, individualistic ideas of personal advancement and religious ideas of morality structured the thinking of many sections of the working class and peasantry. The Christian right took back religion as a means of domination, often making use of the left's own methods to reach out to the working class and to carry out highly effective daily grassroots organising. Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal evangelical churches responded to the people's concrete daily needs by providing answers on a subjective and objective level to a considerable section of the working class through cathartic worship services, which offered celebrations, culture, and leisure in the peripheries and were often the only space for collective life.

Latin American Religious Fundamentalism

The rapid rise of neo-Pentecostalism in Latin America became evident both in the movement's presence in the media and in its engagement in politics. Beginning in the 1980s, the old adage that 'evangelicals don't get involved in politics' no longer rang true. In Brazil, this entry into politics can be summed up in the maxim 'brothers vote for brothers'. Evangelical notions of the world and God began to change, which influenced how they engaged in institutional politics. As the years went by, religion gained force as a linguistic and political code or symbol.

The 2014 presidential election in Brazil demonstrated the extent to which political communication had become dressed in religious garb to further agendas such as defending Christian morality and the patriarchal conception of the family. Religion was also used as a tool in the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in the Chamber of Deputies in 2016. This was evidenced, for example, when Eduardo Cunha, then-president of the Chamber, a Pentecostal belonging to the Assembly of God church, and a key actor in the impeachment process, began the session by saying 'This session is open under God's protection'. Furthermore, a strong moral and religious message permeated the parliamentarians' speeches during the impeachment vote, which were broadcast across the country. Although the evangelical section of Brazil's Congress, which accounted for roughly 36% of all federal deputies in Congress at the time, did not have complete

control over the process, its support for impeachment was fundamental, with 83.85% of the evangelical section voting in favour of Dilma's removal from office.⁹ According to research by Huffpost Brasil, there were 18 mentions in the Chamber of Deputies of the 'crimes of responsibility' that Dilma was alleged to have committed, while the 513 federal deputies mentioned the terms 'family and children' and 'God' a total of 270 and 75 times respectively.¹⁰

The grip of religious rhetoric on Latin American politics was evident once again in the 2019 coup against Evo Morales, when self-proclaimed interim President Jeanine Áñez marched into the presidential palace holding an oversized evangelical Bible above her head and declared, upon seizing power, that 'the Bible has returned to the palace'. Áñez's grand entrance was predated by her proclamation on Twitter just a few years earlier, 'I dream of a Bolivia free of satanic indigenous rites. The city is not for Indians; let them go back to the highlands', an assertion that guided the politics of the coup government and its massacre of Indigenous peoples.¹¹

Furthermore, during the pandemic, religious fundamentalism in Brazil, Chile, Peru, and elsewhere in the region strengthened opposition to public health measures. For example, fundamentalists argued against social distancing by contending that faith, more than such policies, would protect believers. This anti-science approach, present in fundamentalism from the outset, is an important element of the movement.

Although Protestantism in Latin America has been characterised by a strong anti-Catholic bias, evangelicals are by no means the only

religious fundamentalists in the region. In recent decades, evangelicals and Catholics alike have adopted a political discourse saturated with religion and have pursued an extremely conservative agenda, mainly using the legal field to attack progressive causes, such as gender rights, and to weaken democracy. Additionally, their movement is backed by US investment in evangelical missions and projected across the continent.



The theologian and pastor Odja Barros performs Brazil's first same-sex marriage in a Baptist church in the state of Alagoas, 2021.

Reference photograph sourced from Odja Barros

Fundamentalist Causes

The so-called defence of morality is a key component of fundamentalist discourse, manifesting equally in the executive branch, the legislature, and the judiciary. ‘Gender ideology’ is also a major focus of religious fundamentalist discourse, initially emerging from a Catholic context but soon spreading widely across traditional and social media platforms and being absorbed by evangelical fundamentalist sectors. This term is used to condemn everything that is not cis-gender and heterosexual, based on the belief that a family is limited to the fruits of matrimonial relations between a man and a woman. Abortion is also seen as reprehensible, stemming from the view that only God has the power to take a life and thereby denying a woman’s right to make decisions concerning her own body. When their conservative perspective is questioned, fundamentalists label any criticism as ‘gender ideology’, a framing used to provoke moral panic.

The pro-patriarchal family discourse as a political-economic project has made major advances in Latin America. Fundamentalists defend their notion of an ‘ideal family’ as a way to maintain the status quo in public policy, in which women are treated as procreators and principal caregivers responsible for children, the sick, and the elderly, and in which care work in the private sphere continues to fall to women. Fundamentalists also use the law and education to uphold a patriarchal and extremely unequal society.

Religious groups, hand in hand with Latin American conservative elites, have taken to the streets to decry the legalisation of abortion, taking on feminist movements that had advanced the discussion on women's rights to make decisions about their bodies. The insertion of religious fundamentalism into legislative debates has played a decisive role in blocking progressive legal changes from being enacted on important issues in the fight against patriarchy.

In Brazil, it has been the Calvinists (traditional Protestants) who have most fervently fomented a fundamentalist discourse in Jair Bolsonaro's government. They have occupied important ministries, such as Pastor André Mendonça in the Ministry of Justice, Pastor Milton Ribeiro in the Ministry of Education, and the Baptist pastor and Minister for Women, the Family, and Human Rights Damara Alves, a popular figure among evangelicals who has constructed a narrative centred on the gender-based oppression and violence she has suffered, has taken strong action against 'gender ideology' and sexual freedoms, and played an international role in opposing the legalisation of abortion.

Meanwhile, the Presbyterian pastor and former minister of education Milton Ribeiro has advocated for home-schooling, a call that was taken up by the government. The push for home-schooling is a common cause among conservative sectors in Brazil and the US alike that dates back to the 1960s and 1970s. Since the school is an essential space in Brazil, as in many countries, not only from the point of view of education, but also to protect many children from violence and hunger, the home-schooling agenda does not speak to the needs of the poorer strata of the working class. Meanwhile, to prevent the

school from being a space to garner support for progressive causes or any outlook that proposes an alternative perspective on the working class's lived reality, the Bolsonaro government adopted the 'Schools Without Parties' cause, which became a bill used to intimidate teachers to limit themselves to providing an allegedly 'neutral' education.

To understand our current moment, we must understand how the fundamentalist movement has operated strategically alongside the people at the grassroots level. Popular support for fundamentalism's conservative agenda has been essential to legitimise this project in society; without daily activity in the churches, the institutional advance of this project would not have been possible.

The Evangelical Movement's Ascent to Political Power in Brazil

A month before the 2016 coup against then-President Dilma Rousseff, Jair Bolsonaro, a declared Catholic, left the Progressive Party (PP) and joined the Social Christian Party (PSC). At the event confirming his membership, Bolsonaro was baptised – a symbolic ritual for evangelicals – by the president of the party, Pastor Everaldo Pereira of the Assembly of God Church. The baptism didn't happen just anywhere; it took place in Israel, in the waters of the River Jordan, where the Bible states that Jesus was baptised. This led many to believe that Bolsonaro had converted to the evangelical faith, a strategic move to capture evangelicals' imagination.

Moral panic, along with fake news, propelled Bolsonaro's candidacy and his growing relevance to Christians in the 2018 presidential elections. Bolsonaro was able to construct a persona that resonated with evangelicals by presenting himself as an 'authentic' candidate who would defend the patriarchal family, who spoke freely and without a filter, who was not concerned with status, who had simple tastes and habits, and who represented something 'new', standing out in contrast to the years of the Workers' Party (PT) government, which occupied the presidential office from 2003 to 2016 and which his campaign associated with 'old, corrupt politics'. This strategy was ultimately successful, culminating in Bolsonaro's victory in the 2018 elections, in which he received 71% of the evangelical electorate's vote – a sector that represents 31% of Brazil's population – despite

the campaign's violent, racist, and misogynistic discourse.¹² A number of factors were crucial in Bolsonaro's election; along with his increased ties with the evangelical sector, which had come to occupy institutional spaces of power, his campaign was able to propagate powerful discourses and narratives related to family, morality, and so-called gender ideology.

Religious fundamentalism has entered the political sphere to affirm a capitalist model of society, which currently appears with a neofascist face. Fundamentalism, in alliance with the neoconservatism that has advanced in Latin America in recent years, centres a moral discourse that is based on the 'traditional family' and on reproductive issues. Furthermore, it has built a seemingly unshakeable base amongst the working class, which it has moved to support a project of which it is the main victim.



Bishop Sérgio Arthur Braschi of the Diocese of Ponta Grossa (in the state of Paraná) blesses food that Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST) donated to 500 families in need, 2021.

Reference photograph: Jade Azevedo (MST-Paraná)

Resistance and Future Horizons

‘Let us leave behind what divides us and search for what unites us’.

– Camilo Torres Restrepo¹³

The working class lives its religious faith daily in individual rituals, in private conversations with God, in values, and in collective spaces of communion. It is in daily life that the working class is moving towards an evangelical identity centred on the concept of religious brotherhood rather than on a shared identity as workers. This change demonstrates the power of religion at the grassroots level, in which even everyday language is shifting to reflect the lexicon of a people that no longer organises itself exclusively through trade unions, social collectivities for struggle, and popular movements, but instead mainly in churches. No revolution is possible without a revolutionary subject; in the case of Latin America, it is not possible to advance towards any radical transformation of society without accounting for the strong influence of Christianity on the socialisation of the masses.

If evangelism has permeated the homes of working-class families, it is in the home, through recovering liberating theologies of struggle, that religious fundamentalism will be combatted and a new home built where faith is respected and even absorbed as a legitimate language of our class. We must be open to a broader understanding

of religion; as Fidel Castro taught us, ‘nothing can be more anti-Marxist than the petrification of ideas’.¹⁴ It is in the Battle of Ideas and the Battle of Emotions, in profound and respectful dialogue with believers who have found in the Bible a possible path for survival in the face of so much adversity, that religious fundamentalism can be extinguished. It is important to note that the majority of the base of popular movements in Brazil are religious Christians committed to the struggle and to faith. The belief in God, the Bible, faith, and all aspects of religion must be understood as a way of seeking to understand the world; only in doing so can the possibility be created to build a new, liberatory language that unifies the working class behind a common, revolutionary project.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s writings on religion and Christianity, and in particular the role of the Catholic Church, help us go beyond a limited discussion about whether or not one should believe in God.¹⁵ The task at hand is to understand religion and its power to move the people’s hearts and minds toward political action. Gramsci radicalised Marx’s maxim that ‘religion is the opium of the people’: since it is a tool to speak out against and resist the obstinate facts of life, such as hunger and illiteracy, it also provides the power to collectively create new ethical and moral values in the face of an oppressive reality. Religion has two contending faces: it is equally an alienating and transformative force.

Gramsci was aware of how religion has been used as an oppressive tool throughout history, often serving to domesticate the working class and exploit its weaknesses. However, through religion and its ability to move the people’s hearts and minds, it is possible to build

what Gramsci called a counter-hegemonic common sense. To deny this possibility and insist upon solely anti-clericalism and atheism as revolutionary tactics is to propagate an elitist attitude that serves as an impediment to overcoming fundamentalism in Latin America today.

Cuba has much to teach us when it comes to furthering a dialogue about the role of faith in building a revolution. In the early years following Cuba's revolutionary triumph, many religious Cubans who remained on the island did not feel that they were part of the revolutionary process because of the state's resistance to the churches, a product of a still-limited reading of the issue by European Marxism, and because of the US origins of the country's evangelical churches. Though this resistance persisted through the 1970s, it gradually ceded way to a new perspective of joint action between the Church and State. The Cuban Revolution learned, over time, to welcome and incorporate elements of faith to fortify its struggle.

If fundamentalism was able, with the help of substantial funding and grassroots work on the ground, to create a new common sense among workers – even if this common sense is in contradiction with their lived experience – it will be based on the concrete reality and many factors that shape workers' lives that a critical and revolutionary way for the working class to practice its faith will be built. In order to consolidate a philosophy of praxis in Latin America, it is both a necessary and urgent task to critically reconfigure the people's faith in a progressive direction. A Marxist perspective seeks out the counter-hegemonic currents that exist within the forces of religion. We know that believers are not simply passive followers; to the

contrary, it is through their religion that they produce and reproduce worldviews, which are not without contradictions or reformulations. As Gramsci points out, ‘there is one Catholicism for the peasants, one for the *petits-bourgeois* and town workers, one for women, and one for intellectuals which is itself variegated and disconnected’.¹⁶ This is also the case with evangelicals – in discussing religion, we are discussing a multitude of realities that exist within a single faith. It is important not to generalise or homogenise evangelicals in Latin America as if they were all fundamentalists, or as if they were all manipulated. It is not enough for the left to repeat the anti-religious sentiment of some Western Marxist thinkers when it comes to religion in the Global South.

In order to strengthen resistance to religious fundamentalism and its misogynist and hateful discourse, it is essential to construct alternative conceptions and narratives that are meaningful to and that resonate with the working class and peasantry. This counter-hegemonic discourse and resistance can only advance by setting the languages of faith and struggle into dialectical relationship with one another. Fundamentalism has reacted to advances in the progressive camp and has effectively incorporated some of its components into their strategy. Similarly, the progressive camp must look at why this has been successful and extract meaningful lessons to strengthen projects that further the interests of the working class. This must be done through a lens that has been discarded by Marxism in recent decades: one that critiques anti-religious thought. This is the only way that Marxism will be able to undo the knots that religious fundamentalists have tied in popular discourse and to advance in spaces that are occupied by imperialism and its allies. This will be done not

by starting from scratch, but by becoming familiar and dialoguing with religious believers who continue to resist and are often isolated from the popular Marxist camp. Reclaiming Latin America's history of liberation theology and identifying and reaching out to the forms of resistance within the religious sphere is necessary to begin building indispensable bridges between faith and popular struggle.

In order to build progressive dreams and visions of the future, we must foster hope among the people that can be lived in their daily reality. We must also recover and translate our history and the struggle for social rights into popular organisation by creating spaces for education, culture, and community in which the people can gain better understandings of reality and engage in daily experiences of collective solidarity, leisure, and celebration. In these endeavours, it is important not to neglect or dismiss new or different ways of interpreting the world, such as through religion, but, rather, to foster open-minded and respectful dialogue between them to build unity around shared progressive values.

While there are no easy answers, a starting point is to understand the adversaries of the working class and how they act both on a macro and micro level. It is essential to create new mechanisms of dialogue and build a collective, counter-hegemonic project. Such a project will not advance without a deep understanding of what the working class desires and what moves it to act.

The Peruvian Marxist José Carlos Mariátegui, using Miguel de Unamuno's concept of 'agony' (the inner suffering or struggle that humans face), spoke of the need to 're-enchant' the working class;

in other words, to overcome people's disenchantment with life. Both revolutionary Marxists and revolutionary Christians were agonic souls, fighting for this re-enchantment.¹⁷ This revolutionary agony, for Mariátegui, translates into overcoming the antagonism between faith and atheism by equating revolutionary emotion and religious emotion. In truth, what Mariátegui meant is that what moves us, as agonic beings, towards justice is more than what any institution can define: it is a deep feeling, a longing for something not yet real but which we seek to build as a vital necessity. Mariátegui broadens the customary way of talking about religion. He provokes us, arguing that a revolution is always religious – not that it has to do with institutional religion, but that it seeks to answer the deep feelings and longings that are not satisfied under capitalism.





More than 100,000 women from across Brazil participated in the March of Daisies (*Marcha das Margaridas*), a public action in the country's capital, Brasília, in 2019 demanding popular sovereignty, democracy, justice, equality, and an end to violence.

Reference photograph by Natália Blanco (KOINONIA Ecumenical Presence and Service), sourced from the ACT Brazil Ecumenical Forum (FEACT)

Notes

- 1 Mariátegui, 'Man and Myth', 383.
- 2 Franco, 'Um olhar contra-hegemônico e pluralista', 11–46.
- 3 Sousa, 'O Nascimento do Fundamentalismo Cristão nos Estados Unidos', 103–116.
- 4 Semeraro, 'Gramsci e a religião', 95.
- 5 Löwy, *O que é cristianismo da libertação*.
- 6 Stedile and Fernandes, *Brava Gente*, 19.
- 7 Alves, *Dogmatismo e Tolerância*.
- 8 Prashad, *Balas de Washington*, 101.
- 9 Étore Medeiros, 'Boi, Bala e Bíblia contra Dilma'.
- 10 Cunha, Lopes, and Lui, *Religião e política*, 127.
- 11 Prashad, 'Those Who Search for Dawn Don't Fear the Night'; Prashad, 'Bolivia Does Not Exist'.
- 12 Balloussier, 'Cara típica do evangélico brasileiro é feminina e negra'; Balloussier, 'Evangélicos veem Bolsonaro como o mais autoritário'.
- 13 Rojas Barragán and Herrera Farfán, *Camilo Torres Restrepo: Polifonías Del Amor Eficaz*, 293

- 14 Castro, Speech delivered at the Cultural Congress.
- 15 Gramsci, *Sotto la Mole*.
- 16 Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, 1397.
- 17 Löwy, 'Mística Revolucionária', 105–116.

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