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Democracy through the spirit: the Universal Church and its interconnections with Brazilian democracy

Democracia pelo espírito: a Igreja Universal e suas interconexões com a democracia brasileira

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Abstract

The connection between Evangelical church actors and contemporary Brazilian federal politics has raised many speculations, especially regarding the association of these churches with neoliberalism and populist governments. In a different manner, this article aims to show how churches from the third wave of Pentecostalism, and the Universal Church in particular, engage in the most recent historical phase of Brazilian democracy that began in the late 1980's. The growth of Universal Church and the democratic development of Brazil are investigated in parallel here, giving light to the different political connections and arrangements this church has been part of in the last decades. This makes it possible to understand what the alliances between the Universal Church and the country's presidency actually mean for both the church institution and its common members.

Keywords: Brazil; democracy; Pentecostalism; politics.

Resumo

A aproximação entre igrejas e atores evangélicos com o governo federal no corrente cenário político brasileiro tem levantado uma série de especulações, especialmente aquelas que associam essas igrejas com o neoliberalismo e governos populistas. Apesar disso, este artigo propõe uma diferente abordagem, objetivando demonstrar como igrejas da terceira onda do pentecostalismo, especialmente a Igreja Universal, estão engajadas com a mais recente fase da democracia brasileira, que foi iniciada no fim dos anos 1980. O desenvolvimento da Igreja Universal e o da democracia brasileira são pensados em paralelo aqui, iluminando as diferentes conexões e arranjos políticos de que essa igreja tem feito parte nas últimas décadas. Isso torna possível entender o que as alianças entre a Igreja Universal e a presidência do país na verdade significam para a igreja enquanto instituição e para os seus membros.

Palavras-chave: Brasil; democracia; pentecostalismo; política.

Something has been happening simultaneously around the world; journalists and political analysts have discussed the issue on TV and in newspapers; books try to explain the interconnection between events in different parts of the planet; people are discussing it in the streets: a “conservative wave” advances over the beach. The United States elected Donald Trump as its president. Great Britain decided to leave the European Union. Colombians voted against the peace agreement. In Brazil, Jair Messias Bolsonaro was elected, promising to end the rights of minorities with the support of agribusiness, gun lobbyists, and evangelicals. The increased participation of evangelicals in the Congress is one of the reasons why it has been called the most conservative since the dictatorship period.¹

Does this imply evangelicals in politics necessarily entails conservatism? Is the growth in the number of evangelicals in the country responsible for the arrival of a conservative wave on Brazilian beaches? The most direct answer to these questions is: no. “Evangelical” is a broad category and includes political, religious, and theological positions within a broad spectrum. Despite this, I understand that the current political situation(s) arouses curiosities and perceptions that one cannot ignore. For instance, images of Edir Macedo next to President Jair Bolsonaro during the Independence Day military parade cannot go unnoticed.

While these issues were arising, I was doing fieldwork with the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) and I could see them unfolding in the lives of those who attend this church. While the country discussed the changes brought by the participation of evangelicals in politics, I witnessed simultaneous changes within the Universal Church, which made me wonder if these changes did not work through a feedback process. Furthermore, if we want to discuss the evangelicals’ participation in politics, it seems important to ask what it is to act politically and what political space Pentecostalism has occupied.

In the work developed here, this means that more than understanding what imbrication there is between religion and politics, I prefer to agree with Ali Agrama (2010) whose view is that we cannot talk about overlap or imbrications, because that would mean we have stable concepts of what religion, politics or

1 As you can see in Queiroz (2018), Caram (2014), and Nova... (2015).

secularism are. The definition of the religion and of the secular are an important part of governments' sovereignty. In Agamben's (2005) terms, it is exactly through the sovereignty of the State that religious acts are defined as such and are authorized or not as part of the "good life". And that is exactly what many Brazilian evangelical leaders realized. They understood that, as a minority (Burity, 2011), the best way to deal with their situation it is to be in the center of the power itself and retain the ability to define the appropriateness of their participation there.

It is important to highlight that the discussion of "democracy" in this article focuses predominately on Brazil's current democratic phase, that which was inaugurated by the elections for drafting the new constitution, succeeding more than two decades of dictatorship. Nevertheless, in addition to this reference to democracy as an historical period, this article also intends by "democracy" the political possibilities opened with the formation of a public sphere – both democratic (the informal assembly of citizens that through deliberation forms the public opinion), and institutional (parliament, ministries, courts, and any official body of decision making) (Habermas, 2008). Democracy is a term largely discussed and contested, and does not rely upon only one specific definition. I do not ignore that. On the contrary, by discussing the participation of religion in the public sphere I hope to be contributing to the discussion about how citizens choose to be represented and how they base their choices on their ideas of a good life. However, to do this I begin by analyzing not a concept or ideal type, but an empirical period of actual governments that can be described as democratic (Dahl, 2015).

This article is not about the political system inside of the UCKG, or an understanding of a Christian church as a democratic enterprise – far from that, the UCKG is actually managed by a bishop council where the founder always has the last word. What I am arguing here is that the Universal Church grows with a tight relationship with Brazil's democratic governments, and that this relationship deeply affects the development of both the Brazilian political scenario and the Church's political and moral positions. I am discussing the chronological development of the UCKG in parallel with Brazil's contemporary democratic phase.

The analysis here presented was possible by means of different methodologies. Most importantly, a multi-sited fieldwork was conducted in four different

UCKG temples. For the purpose of this article, I will introduce in greater detail two ethnographic sites, both in the Metropolitan Region of Recife, Pernambuco, where the main examples brought forward here occurred. The first of these is the main “Catedral da Fé” in Recife. The “Catedral da Fé” is a large temple, with five thousand seats in its main hall. Despite the size of the building and the number of people who attend this temple, I managed to develop closer ties with members of the community through the participation in small groups (such as the youth group, and various groups for women) and established a constant presence not only during services but also before and after them. I conducted fieldwork in this temple on two different occasions, between 2011 and 2012, and in 2018. The names of bishops and pastors who are public figures are maintained, while I have preserved the identity of the regular members.

In contrast, the second was a small temple in the outskirts of Recife that could seat only 136 people. Although on many Sundays the temple was full, during the week only a few dozen people attended. This church was adjacent to a bakery and the doors opened straight onto the main hall, which had an unfinished roof and no air-conditioner. My fieldwork in this temple took place between 2019 and 2020, over nine months. The small size of this church and congregation demands that details such as names and the temple’s precise location not be shared, to protect the identity of my interlocutors. Nevertheless, it is important to make clear that an ethnography of a large institution as the Universal Church demands the use of other methodologies beyond face-to-face fieldwork. WhatsApp groups, instagram accounts, blogs, and Youtube channels were important part of research, which even though distant in space were synchronic in time – meaning that I kept track of the activities and interactions that happened in these platforms while they were happening. That is a characteristic that differs from the sources produced by the institution itself – as books, TV shows, soap operas, and newspaper – that do not permit a more direct relationship. Notwithstanding, these latter sources were also used as data in this research.

Pentecostalism's third wave + democratization

After a violent and repressive dictatorship initiated in the 1960's, Brazil could finally see by the 1980's a return of its democratic institutions. Through popular demand, the country first saw the sanction of the law 6.683, known as the Amnesty Law, followed by a new Constitution in 1988 and the first direct Presidential election in 1989. Along with these main events, democratization brought with it the possibility of expanding a public sphere. In fact, the new socio-political moment in Brazil represented the opening of possibilities previously restricted to its citizens. Even though when we think about this moment we usually focus on the proliferation of political parties and social movements, I want to highlight that the opening of the public sphere happens beyond the limits of these institutions; and it is in this context that the so-called third wave of Brazilian Pentecostalism takes place. The expansion of these churches is directly linked to these social changes in its complexities and paradoxes. Furthermore, they make sense in a new context of democratization, neoliberal policies and multiplication of associations and possibilities, but also of doubts.

The Constituent Assembly² was one of the milestones of the democratization process in Brazil. In 1986, the Universal Church elected its first congressman as part of this Assembly, Bishop Roberto Augusto Lopes.³ In the following federal election, in 1989, UCKG elected three congress representatives. This means that only nine years after its foundation and at the first opportunity, the UCKG as an institution was able to articulate itself to have a representative. Furthermore, not only has the Universal Church elected congress representatives in every election since, but the number of representatives has incrementally increased.

The end of the dictatorship, the amnesty, the writing of a new constitution and the possibility to vote for president after a long time were part of an excitement for a new phase where much seemed possible. Matching with the mood of the time, the Universal Church showed itself as concerned with different

2 This Assembly wrote the current Brazil's constitution that guarantees democratic freedoms.

3 Nevertheless, he left UCKG in the following year.

aspects of its members' lives – love, family, health, finances – all of which had a day or time dedicated to its pursuit. Of course, the UCKG was not the only one with such a holistic approach, evangelical churches in general seemed to be attuned to the needs of the time. In 1994, a survey in São Paulo showed how participation in political groups had fallen by half, while participation in churches had doubled (Freston, 1996; Igreja..., 1995). In this sense, the Constituent Assembly not only circumscribes in time the beginning of a new political phase in Brazil, but also the enlargement of possibilities for an institution like UCKG.

Fernando Collor was the first president elected in this phase. According to Macedo's biography (Tavolaro, 2007), he supported Collor and mobilized his church in this regard. Upon meeting the then-candidate, he had asked "only" to bless him in his inauguration ceremony, a promise not fulfilled by Collor (Tavolaro, 2007). The Collor period is known not only for the scandals that led to the president's impeachment, but for its radical measures to contain inflation. It is also during this period that Macedo buys Record Network and pays it in several installments of US dollars that, according to his own version of the facts, were facilitated by the freezing episode.⁴ In the version given in Macedo's biographies, the president was deeply against the UCKG founder's interests and was directly linked to the episode of his arrest. Nevertheless, Collor signs the concession necessary to own a television broadcasting company in favor of Macedo before leaving the government.

The next elected president was Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC). Macedo declared his support for FHC in his first election, but preferred not to defend him in the campaign for his second term. FHC's government was known for continuing with the privatization projects of public companies and for the social measures that followed the guidelines of the International Monetary Fund.

Two decades ago, Birman and Lehmann (1999) pointed out that the only constancy of the UCKG regarding its actions in institutional politics was its opposition, and even demonization, of the Workers' Party (PT) politicians and

4 Collor's government economic plan to control high inflation rates included block the access to saving accounts.

its candidate for president. Although this affirmation was true at the time, even this only constancy changed a few years later. The partnership between PT and UCKG began during the election campaign that elected Lula for president in 2002, when UCKG openly supported PT.

The PT with which UCKG aligned was no longer the same “outsider” party founded in the 1980s, but was already becoming similar to what would be seen during its government for the next 13 years. Between the 1980s and 2002, with the attempt to make the presidential candidacy accepted by a broader part of the population, the party underwent a flexibilization of its ideals, something that also occurred in left-wing parties in other parts of the world. Instead of being an opposition to capitalism, its leaders gradually showed interest in promoting economic growth and mitigating the impacts of neoliberalism on the most vulnerable population. After these changes, in 2002 Lula was elected, in what is usually called his “peace and love” phase. That is the front of the former president that showed little inclination for deep reforms, focused on the idea that he would govern for everyone, and that was marked by his “Letter to the Brazilian People” (Lula da Silva, 2002). In that letter he made it clear that if elected he would comply with all financial agreements and debts created by the country. This means that in the election in which former President Lula took office there was a strong signal for an alignment with financial and industrial capital, and an intense accommodation of the interests of the various groups that supported him. It is in this context and as part of one of these groups that the UCKG approaches this government (Antunes; Santana; Praun, 2019; Marques; Mendes, 2006; Vieira, 2012).

What is important to understand is that these changes are part of the process that made this connection possible. There was an intersection between the discourses of both sides about the importance of ethical behavior in politics. In addition, the coalition between the PT and the PL was also important at the time – a party in which the majority of the Universal Church’s congressmen were affiliated; and a pragmatic perception of that alliance (Oro, 2003). Until the elections of former president Lula, PT had acted as a parliamentary opposition to the different governments, and among its main concerns was a “more ethical way” of carrying out politics. This was also one of the concerns expressed by the UCKG political leaders. Understanding the world as a battle between good and evil, and institutional politics and the National

Congress as spaces dominated by evil, the only way to change this, according to their logic, would be to bring “men of God” into politics. As Oro (2003) pointed out, this also means that for UCKG’s members, voting is itself a religious act; it is a contribution the believer makes for the good to win the spiritual battle that takes place in politics. Or, in the words of Edir Macedo himself: “Christians should not only discuss, but mainly seek to participate in order to collaborate for the resourcefulness of the national politics, and, above all, with the project of a nation idealized by God for His people” (Macedo; Oliveira, 2008, p. 25, my translation).

Furthermore, 2002 was an important election year for the UCKG. The Church and Macedo not only supported Lula for the first time as a candidate, they also elected their first senator, Marcelo Crivella. Crivella is a UCKG “licensed bishop” – known for this position as much as for his performance as a gospel singer (and for being Edir Macedo’s nephew). After the first election of former president Lula, politicians linked to the UCKG were deeply connected with PT’s government program – including nominations to ministries.

One of the signs of the deep relationship established between the Lula government and the UCKG was the former president’s incentives for his vice-president to join in the foundation of the PRB (Brazilian Republican Party), an important step in the insertion of the Universal Church in institutional politics. Currently called Republicanos, this political party was founded in 2005 by leaders connected to the UCKG, including Marcelo Crivella, and other evangelical churches, and also by the vice president of the republic at the time, José de Alencar. In the elections that followed the founding of the party, congressional candidates connected to the UCKG would launch their campaigns affiliated with that party, as is the case for all current church-related Congress Representatives. In 2018’s elections for the National Congress, thirty congressional representatives affiliated to the Republicanos were elected, seventeen of them connected to the UCKG.

Furthermore, in 2010, since Dilma Rousseff’s candidacy, the UCKG and Edir Macedo himself played a specific role in deepening its credibility among a less liberal public. Dilma was intensely discredited for her position on reproductive rights, which had been a central theme since the 2010 campaign. In his blog at the time, Edir Macedo referred to some of the attacks and criticized “Christians who spread rumors”. In one of his posts, entitled “Dilma is a victim of lies

spread on the internet” (Macedo, 2010) he said “Those who think they are doing some service to the Kingdom of God, spreading information without being sure of its veracity, are actually playing the devil’s game.”

It was during Rousseff’s government that Marcelo Crivella left his post as a senator to become a Minister for the federal government. In assuming the position of Minister of Fishing and Agriculture, Crivella became the first appointed minister linked to the UCKG. He left this position after only two years to become a candidate in Rio de Janeiro’s state executive power. Even though he did not win that election, two years after he became mayor of the city Rio de Janeiro. In that same election, in 2016, the Republicanos elected a total of 106 mayors around the country.

Despite having declared its support to most governments so far, it was during the Lula administration that the UCKG began to have a close relationship with the federal government. The participation of the vice-president at the time in the founding of the party that would become the current Republicanos, and the nomination as Minister of Justice of Marcio Thomas Bastos, who had been Edir Macedo’s lawyer in the case of his arrest, created an atmosphere of easy circulation. Writing on the episode of Macedo’s arrest, and still at the time of the alliance with the PT, *Folha Universal* stated: “one of the most indignant voices against the bishop’s arrest at the time was that of the then president of PT, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva” (Tempo..., 2011).

In Dilma’s government, this relationship seemed sealed from day one. The *Folha Universal* issue published after the inauguration of the president featured on its cover the famous photo of Macedo behind bars, followed by a photo where he greeted the inaugurated president during the ceremony. The article highlighted all the “persecutions” that the bishop allegedly suffered and that time would “show the truth”, with his image at the inauguration as a great symbol. The title of the cover reads “Inauguration of Honor: Nineteen years after being arrested, Bishop Edir Macedo is greeted along with heads of state and other authorities at the inauguration of the first female president of Brazil. See how prejudice and injustice have been defeated on this historic day” (Folha Universal, 2011) Dilma, in turn, affirmed their relationship through the appointment of a minister connected to the UCKG, with her presence at the inauguration of the Temple of Salomon, the granting of an interview congratulating the 1000th edition of *Folha Universal*, among other actions.

The partnership between the UCKG and PT lasted until a few weeks before the impeachment process of Dilma Rousseff began in 2016. Nevertheless, already in December of the previous year, congressman Marcos Pereira (PRB-SP) published the article entitled “Time to Reform Brazil” in *Folha Universal*, which described the crimes of which former president Dilma Rousseff was accused, and affirmed “we need to act” (Pereira, 2015). On April 6, 2016, the “Evangelical Parliamentary Front”, including the politicians connected with the UCKG, declared through its president that the majority of the congressional representatives associated with it would vote for the impeachment. Ten days after, Republicanos would also release their official declaration of support for the impeachment. This was a public statement of the changes that I could also see happening inside of the UCKG.

How should we understand this move from UCKG politicians? Let us start with William Connolly’s (2005a) ideas. Connolly demonstrates how there is a complex assemblage involving different actors and institutions to constitute the actions of what he calls “empire”. Then, he makes two important moves for my work. First, Connolly (2005a) attaches importance to religions and subjects who act from their values in this power structure. Then he defines it as “an ambiguous, porous assemblage containing positive supports and possibilities as well as ugly modes of domination and danger. It is potentially susceptible to reconfiguration through the cumulative effect of selective state actions, changes of policy by international institutions, and militant cross-state citizen action” (Connolly, 2005b, p. 152).

Connolly (2005b) believes that there is a deep connection between these actors, one that cannot be understood through the idea of cause and consequence. This means that we cannot separate the individual factors and demonstrate how one causes the other. The author believes that these elements actually infiltrate each other and metabolize themselves in a mobile process. They resonate with each other and morph into a complex energized mutual imbrication. “[...] heretofore unconnected or loosely associated elements fold, bend, blend, emulsify, and dissolve into each other, forging a qualitative assemblage resistant to classical models of explanation” (Connolly, 2005a, p. 870).

This understanding that the assemblage that constitutes the political occurs through resonances, and the idea that, through its porosity and ambiguity, it is susceptible to reconfiguration, makes it possible to understand the

events in Brazil and the reorganizations within the UCKG in recent years. However, we still need to understand how intense changes happened in the political articulations of the Universal Church, and their relationship with the Brazilian political reconfiguration. First, the UCKG went from refusing, and even demonizing, the figure of former president Lula, to become one of his important political alliances; then to turn, again, into a strong opposition to the Workers' Party; and finally, to provide fundamental support for the current President Jair Bolsonaro. In Connolly's (2005b) terms, beyond ideas of cause and consequence, here we could watch the assemblage of a "resonance machine".

"Moved" by the Holy Spirit

To understand how Pentecostals are always poised for action, even if these actions seem contradictory, it is important to understand their movements between different institutional alliances in this period. Maria José de Abreu (2020) explores how charismatic Christianity simultaneously anticipated and mirrored the current drama between sovereignty and populism in Brazil, and elsewhere in the world. She develops this idea through the study of the tautology of the Catholic charismatic movement and religious performances in the country. Tautology operates like a pendulum, swinging from side to side, and makes speech highly rhythmic. Abreu (2020) points out that one of the extreme ranges of the tautological pendulum is speaking in tongues. Speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, is not a language that communicates something specific; more than that, is its own event. In other words, it is through experience that religious and populist beliefs are developed, even if they do not seem logical (Abreu, 2020). These experiences include being open to change and consequently to moving your positions by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This means that where other people see contradictions, Pentecostals and charismatics see the virtue of be open to listening to spiritual direction.

In considering institutional politics, Marcelo Crivella's campaigns for executive roles are emblematic in this sense. While in the 2014 election campaign for governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro he posed next to Dilma Rousseff and told voters they should opt for the "Dilmela" option, in his 2020 campaign for

mayor of the city of Rio de Janeiro he promoted himself as the candidate supported by Bolsonaro. Furthermore, his choice for vice mayor was a Lieutenant Colonel who posed for their official photos in her uniform; the colors of his campaign were taken from Brazilian flag; and he appeared on social networks during this phase doing stunts such as “the push up challenge”. All these brought Crivella’s aesthetics closer to Bolsonaro’s, making it easy for the possible voter to identify a connection between them.

In the period between the UCKG’s alliance with PT and its support for President Jair Bolsonaro, there was a moment when it was evident that there was some kind of social change taking place in Brazil, but at the time, its meanings and directions were not clear. The massive wave of protests against different political institutions in 2013, followed by the re-election of former president Dilma Rousseff, followed by protests against her presidency and her party, culminated in the 2016 impeachment. These were the most spectacular moments of this process, and were also part of the articulation for other changes.

To understand these events, let us think what was happening amongst evangelical churches’ members in this period. Notably, there was a growing attentiveness in politics amongst individuals who attended “evangelical” churches. Mauricio Jr. (2019), in his research with the Assembly of God, entitles them “citizen believers”. According to Mauricio Jr., the “citizen believer” is the result of an ethical project to turn him-or-herself into the type of person who is always ready to defend Pentecostal ideas. This means that the young people he researched – especially in spaces like the university – anticipated and developed arguments they might need to articulate when confronted with negative perceptions of their faith, or with behavior they perceived as sin. However, this does not mean that they were always prepared in a combative stance. The idea of preaching through their actions and their love is also important to them in this context. Likewise, they agreed with their leaders in their perception that “believers” should take their place as citizens, but they did not necessarily agree with the same leaders’ positions on more contentious issues, such as same-sex marriage and the decriminalization of abortion.

This process of understanding yourself and your rights through the idea of citizenship was something I could see happening at the UCKG in previous years as well, especially through Godllywood, created in 2010, and the Raabe Project it administers. This project gives support to women who have suffered

domestic violence, explaining to them their rights guaranteed by law. In 2012, they started to promote political protests against domestic violence with the aim of teaching a wider audience of women about their rights. Their campaign used a theme song with the lyrics “raise your head it’s time to fight, stop the violence, break the silence”. However, the example of this women’s group helps us to understand how these changes keep happening towards different ends. If at first I could see the emergence of church members advocating publicly for women’s rights, later I could also observe a shift.

In early 2018, Mrs. Wanda, a pastor’s wife responsible for these projects at Recife’s Cathedral da Fé, told me that, through “the guidance of the Holy Spirit” the Raabe Project would focus “more on the spiritual side”, instead of the political and legal side I had been observing. In practical terms, this meant, among other things, the interruption of the UCKG’s efforts as an institution of both the dissemination of the law against domestic violence, and its efforts to remove women from spaces where they are considered to be vulnerable to violence.

What happened within the Raabe Project is just one of the changes I could witness in the Universal Church during this period. The *Folha Universal* newspaper editorial change is another that deserves to be highlighted. In the issue from January 16, 2011, the cover story stated, “Unwanted pregnancy is treated with hypocrisy in the country, avoiding a serious debate on the legalization of abortion” (Vítimas..., 2011). The publication also brought the opinion of experts linked to the Feminist Center for Studies and Advocacy, of the Institute of Bioethics, of Human Rights and Gender, and praised President Dilma Rousseff’s decision to nominate a woman to lead the Ministry of Human Rights and the Special Secretariat for Policies for Women.

Seven years later, on September 30, the *Folha Universal* published a cover story in which the UCKG signaled its alignment with the country’s new conservative alliances that were rejecting any project or agenda linked to terms such as gender, feminism and abortion. The article, published a week before the first round of the 2018 presidential elections, asked, “Why is October 7th Children’s Day?”⁵ and stated, “The Brazilian family we know is under attack

5 October 7th is a reference to the day of the first round of the Brazilian 2018 presidential elections.

and the main target are the little ones. See how to combat this aggression with your vote” (Cury, 2018). The article also stated in a warning tone, “If the population does not elect people who defend family values, the laws that are intended to bring the ideology of gender to children and adolescents will be approved,” and warned, “It already happens in the world and it does not work out” (Cury, 2018). In that context, this publication was positioned in favor of those who were “against gender ideology”,⁶ one of Jair Bolsonaro’s campaign foundations.

Since the time of the break with Rouseff, it was possible to see clear political changes at the UCKG, including the editorial line of *Folha Universal*. Thus, terms and groups that would guarantee authority on women’s rights in 2011 are portrayed in a negative way in 2018. These changes in the political spectrum are not a problem in a context that, as we saw with de Abreu (2020), considers the capacity to be “moved” by the Holy Spirit as not only more important than congruency, but to be the only way to lead a good life.

Nevertheless, the political changes that have taken place at the UCKG are not an isolated case. As pointed out by de Abreu (2020), this characteristic of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements not only anticipated but also mirrored the current political mood. When it was decided that the Raabe Project would shift “the focus to the spiritual part by the guidance of the Holy Spirit” (Mrs. Lucia, 65), the transition from the language of “political rights” to that of “religious power” (Shapiro, 2021) was evident. This reflects a gradual change that began in Brazil a few years before, reaching the wider population as well as members of Pentecostal churches. The inauguration of the Temple of Solomon, soap operas recounting biblical epics, and TV shows broadcasted by Record showing ideas similar to those of church meetings, are part of a biblical literalism, where all these elements turn everyday life decisions into a metonymy of biblical times.

Furthermore, as Ruth Marshall (2010) states, more than a political critique of religion, it is also necessary to carry out a political analysis from a religious

6 It is important to make a remark on this topic here. The so called “gender ideology” became a topic of large discussion and was important in the development of the 2018 presidential election. Because of its importance in the political scenario the theme appears here in the positions taken by actors that I discuss. However, this article does not intend to specifically discuss the meanings and the uses of this term. In Sá Leitão (2021), I discuss the subject and different authors’ perspectives on it further.

perspective. This means that, in the case of Christianity, it is necessary to take into account its eschatological, messianic and pneumatic aspects in its interaction with politics. Moreover, here I want to emphasize that the UCKG is a church, a religious institution, and not just a political and social actor. As one of my most important interlocutors always told me when I had some doubt and I asked her for clarification, “first you have to understand that we believe that there is the good and the bad” (Daniela, 25 years old).

In addition to this distinction pointed out by Daniela, a millenarian eschatology is of great importance to the UCKG. In other words, for them, the world is always about to witness the return of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the focus of the main services and many of the discussions through different media of the Universal Church is salvation. Or, in the words of Pastor Mauricio “one of the devil’s greatest tricks is to make you believe that what we are talking here is rubbish; that Jesus is not coming back, or that you can ask for forgiveness at the last minute. But He is coming back, and you won’t even have time to realize what’s going on.”

In this sense, Susan Harding (1994) argues that the distinction between religion and politics makes it harder to see the real impact of religious beliefs in the political world. For this author, we need to understand that all religious action is also political. Nevertheless, political here is not necessarily advocating for specific actions in a social political frame, but a political narrative that contests the hegemonic secular (“modern”) voices of journalists and academics – whose theories of history are also political – for control over the definition and meaning of current events and of “history” more broadly” (Harding, 1994, p. 20). A good example of what Harding affirms is how the UCKG, as an institution, interpreted the protocols related to the coronavirus pandemic. The collection of data to map exposure to the covid-19 virus and rates of vaccination were interpreted through this church’s eschatological views in the article published on its website entitled, “Governments wish to map who took the vaccine against covid-19” (Governos..., 2021), where it affirmed:

In a panoramic view of this scenario, we can see the tendency of world governments to increasingly control the lives of ordinary people. It is also interesting to observe the relationship of this fact with the system that will be implemented by the antichrist, when he is revealed as world leader (as pointed out in

the biblical book of Revelation). This model of control over the population will reach its peak when no one will be able to buy or sell if they are not part of the system imposed by it. Furthermore, whoever opposes it will have to pay with their life.

In their context, it is part of the daily battle of a UCKG Christian to choose the side of the good and spread the word, and this includes political action. And this was no different in the 2018 elections, or in any elections. A good example of the importance of these issues in evangelical political thinking in 2018 does not come from the UCKG, but from the Assembly of God's newspaper, *Mensagem da Paz*. The newspaper published an infographic during the presidential campaign with the title "Each candidate's position on subjects of importance to Christians" (see Braga; Trindade, 2018). This spreadsheet presented the following columns: "abortion legalization", "gay marriage", "drug legalization", "gender ideology", "reduced age of criminal responsibility", "population disarmament", "economy", and "embassy in Jerusalem". Jair Bolsonaro was listed as being 'against' in the columns "abortion legalization", "gay marriage", "drug legalization", "gender ideology", and "population disarmament"; and 'in favor' of the "reduced age of criminal responsibility" and "embassy in Jerusalem". In the "economy" column, the definition listed was "free market". Among the candidates listed, he was the only one positioned as against "gay marriage" and "disarmament of the population". He shared only with Álvaro Dias the position against "gender ideology" was also the only one in favor of the "embassy in Jerusalem". The topics chosen as "important for Christians" and the position attributed to Bolsonaro in them are of great importance for understanding the contemporary Brazilian scenario. Bolsonaro's approach to evangelical groups begins to take place two terms before his candidacy, and the different historical, political, and social events that have taken place in the country since then make it clear that this process was not monolithic.

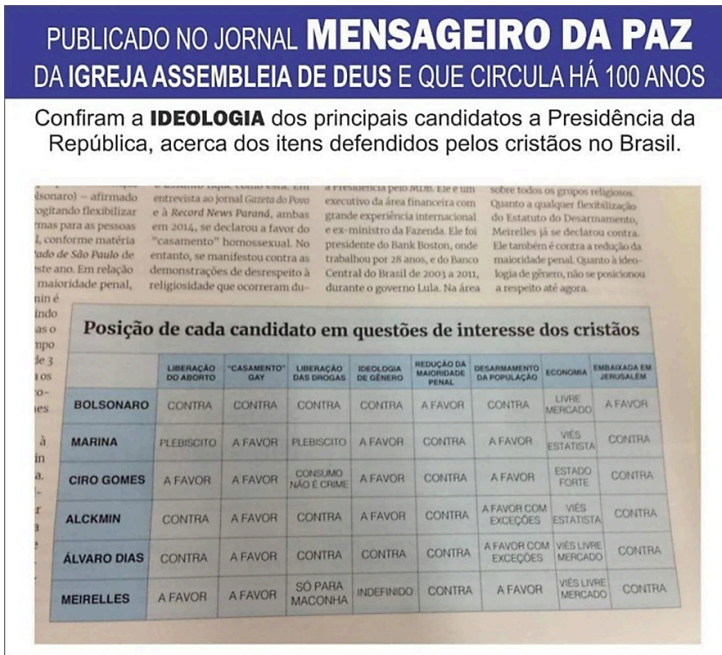


Figure 1. Photo from *Estadão* newspaper of the chart published by *Mensageiro da Paz*, Assembly of God newspaper (Braga; Trindade, 2018).

Despite not converting to any specific church, Bolsonaro professes to be a catholic. Nevertheless, he goes beyond previous presidents who accepted the support of evangelical churches. He associates his image to these directly, ascending to altars, being blessed by pastors, holding Israel's flag. Even before becoming a candidate for the presidency, he was already known for his position on subjects such as gay marriage and abortion legalization. Through his campaign, Bolsonaro tunes his alignment with this part of society even more, by incorporating issues such as a broader support for the state of Israel. As he said in an interview to Silas Malafaia: "I was in Goiânia, in the top of a car, when someone showed me [the news]: 'look, Trump just decided to move the embassy to Jerusalem'. There was a guy there with a blue flag with a David symbol, am I right? I said 'come here'. The guy brought the flag, I picked it up, and I said I would publicly commit [to the subject]" (Bolsonaro, 2020). Bolsonaro includes this issue in his campaign on account of the

demands made by part of his electorate who believes in its necessity based on their eschatological views.⁷

What is acting politically?

One of the questions that are raised in a context where a high number of congress representatives are connected with Pentecostal churches is how appropriate is political action based on religious values, or the presence of religious leaders in this political scenario. Nevertheless, there is another question that precedes this one: “what is acting politically?”. According to Giorgio Agamben (2005) to understand what it is to act politically we need to look at what is in the space between political law and political fact, between what is right and what is lived. In this article, understanding the intersection between politics and religion in Brazil entails understanding what is lived by believers’ communities in their everyday lives.

As explained above, the Universal Church and politicians linked to it were allies of the Workers’ Party from the campaign for former president Lula’s first term until a few weeks before the impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff. In the 2018 presidential elections, Bishop Macedo and Record Network played important roles in Bolsonaro’s electoral campaign, especially in the second round of elections. Jair Bolsonaro already had a history in the National Congress, in which he had served since 1990, when he decided to launch his candidacy for presidency.

In the first mandate of former president Dilma Rousseff, Jair Bolsonaro (then federal congressman) approached the Evangelical Parliamentary Front (FPE) in discussions related to the project “School Without Homophobia”. This material was produced by the Ministry of Education (MEC) with the aim of

7 Evangelical support for relocating the Brazilian embassy in Israel to Jerusalem is connected with the phenomenon of Christian support for the Israeli state, Christian Zionism, and admiration for the Jewish elements or philosemitism. There is a long history of these in the United States and some countries in Europe, but its development in the Global South is quite recent. Even though this phenomenon may appear in different ways in different Christian groups, most of them justify their belief through the biblical passage “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). For more on the subject: Sá Leitão (2021).

making students aware of homophobia and bullying practiced in schools. Members of the FPE, however, understood that this material was “more an apology for homosexuality and encouragement of early sexuality of children and teenagers in our public schools, than anti-homophobia material” (Marcos Pereira-Republicanos, my translation).⁸ Bolsonaro endorsed this chorus against the distribution of the material. Congress representatives met with the president and vice-president at the time (2011), to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the MEC material. Their requests were granted, and the president suspended the delivery of the material to schools.

It was just one of many controversies involving Congress representatives with evangelical origins joined by Bolsonaro. When minority groups protested the appointment of congressman and pastor of the Assembly of God Marco Feliciano (PSC-SP) to chair the Human Rights Committee, Bolsonaro argued with protesters at the doors of the Congress. In 2016, he became affiliated to the same party as Feliciano, the Christian Social Party (PSC). The president of that party, Pastor Everaldo, baptized Bolsonaro in the Jordan River in the same year. In addition, in 2013, Bolsonaro had his wedding celebrated by the well-known pastor Silas Malafaia.⁹

During this same period Bolsonaro became a well-known figure for advocating for more open access to firearm acquisition by civilians, and for opposing sex-education in schools. He also gave several interviews and made statements that led to heated discussions in Brazilian society. Notable examples include his admiration for the military dictatorship, his belief that women should be paid less in their jobs – according to him, their right to maternity leave would be harmful for the companies they work for –, his denial of the Jewish holocaust, and his positions against LGBTQ+ rights. Furthermore, in 2014 elections, he became the most popular¹⁰ federal congressional representative in the country. All of this meant that when the 2018 presidential election arrived, Jair Bolsonaro’s reputation as a defender of “traditional morality” –

8 In the original: “[...] mais uma apologia ao homossexualismo e incentivo à sexualidade precoce das crianças e adolescentes de nossas escolas públicas, do que material anti-homofobia” (Resposta..., 2011).

9 ADVEC’s (Assembly of God Victory in Christ) pastor and leader.

10 With more votes.

much of which was meaningful to the evangelical population –, had drawn the attention of conservatives and fascist groups, and Bolsonaro actively presented himself as an alternative to the “old politics”.

The 2018 presidential election took place in two rounds. The first was among thirteen candidates, and the second round was between the two candidates that received more votes in the first – Jair Bolsonaro from PSL¹¹ and Fernando Hadad from PT. Only a few days before the first round, Bishop Edir Macedo, after being asked by an UCKG member on a social network, publicly stated that he would vote for Bolsonaro. After this personal and unofficial statement by Macedo, only a few days before the election’s first round, it was possible to witness an articulation of the Universal Church and Record Network that started to support and defend the Bolsonaro’s candidacy. In the case of the UCKG, this entailed campaigning amongst church members – including requesting votes during meetings, in its newspaper articles, in church websites and blogs, and recommending that they watch Record TV shows about the candidate. Record, in its turn, provided space for interviews and statements by Jair Bolsonaro.

It is important to highlight that, during the 2018 elections, it was also possible to vote for federal and state Congress representatives, senator, and state governor. That year, I did fieldwork at Catedral da Fé, Recife – the main temple of the UCKG in the region. There I could see that, despite electoral campaigning being allowed only one month prior to the elections in September, since May pastors who would run for Congress were introduced to church members and visitors in a variety of ways. Bishop Ossessio Silva was running for federal congressman, and Bishop William Brigido was running for state congressman for the first time. Months before election day, both were regularly called to the altar to cast out demons that manifested amongst members and visitors during services. Bishop Alexandre Mendes, the bishop responsible for the Catedral da Fé of Recife at the time, repeated during the performance of these exorcisms: “If God was not with these men, if they were not true men of God, they could not fight demons like this”.

Months before the election, each person who passed through the cathedral gates received a small flag of the state, Pernambuco. Minutes before Bishop

11 Later, already elected, Jair Bolsonaro left the PSL and did not affiliate to any other party.

Alexandre went up to the altar, a song that repeated the name of the state was played several times. The bishop would go up to the altar and continue singing the song and then he would say, every Sunday, the same words: “You should be proud of the place you live; it’s an amazing place, a beautiful place... You have the privilege to live in a place that many people come to spend their holidays...”. Later in the meeting, he would broadcast two different videos on the church screens. The first depicted actions already carried out by Bishop Ossessio Silva in his time as a state congressman. In the second, Bishop Alexandre was seen visiting places lacking basic infrastructure – stretches of polluted rivers, neighborhoods with no sewer system – talking about how these problems could be solved by the right politicians. During these videos, Bishop Alexandre would also call for the importance of praying for the place where you live.

Every Sunday, Bishop Alexandre argued for the importance of voting, praised the region while also showing its problems, and introduced those who could fix these inadequacies. He urged for the need of more “men of God” in politics and proved that both candidates that he recommended were men of God by their ability to perform exorcisms “in name of Jesus”. Beyond the “spiritual” evidence, Bishop Alexandre also introduced “secular” evidence. These were the projects Bishop Ossessio was involved in during his previous years in politics. The problems he could not solve were not in his domain. To ensure the continuity of the former, members should vote for bishop Ossessio to be re-elected; and to fix the latter, they should elect someone for its jurisdiction, in this case Bishop William.

This institutional way of dealing with the electoral process, and the official and unofficial campaigns to elect their own representatives, is not new at the UCKG. At the micro level, Universal Church assistants not only support the pastors with whatever they need during the service and help other believers and visitors but are also divided into groups with different community care goals. This also includes a group (or just an assistant depending on the size of the community) responsible for helping and informing members about electoral details – such as the registration process, change of constituency, legalization in case of lost documents or absence in the last elections,¹² and

12 Voting in the main elections is mandatory in Brazil, and failure to do so demands a justification placed with the electoral office before the following elections.

distribution of instructional material. This work is not about specific candidates but is part of an educational process of that emphasizes the organizational importance of acting as a group.

Pastor Ivo, leader of a small temple on the outskirts of Recife, repeated several times during the weeks that preceded the election for Guardianship Council:¹³ “I transferred my vote here because I live here now, because it is important to vote for the people who will act in the place you live. If you still vote in another city, transfer your polling place.” In Brazil, voting in the main elections – at Federal, State, and Municipal level – is mandatory. However, there are also other elections for smaller administrative positions, for which everyone has the right, but not the obligation to vote, such as the Guardianship Council. In 2019, the Universal Church supported candidates for the Guardianship Council of several municipalities. In this case, there was the need not only to introduce the candidates but also to explain the importance of voting for this position, convincing church members to vote even if they had never heard of the position or of their right to participate in its determination, and even though they were hearing about it on neither radio nor TV, advertisements nor on the streets, as happens in the main elections. In this regard, Pastor Ivo repeated on different occasions in the months preceding the elections for the Guardianship Council:

There is a girl in this community who has problems. She is a sweet girl, but there are demons after her. She has been violent many times. Last time she threatened her mother with a knife. The mother called the guardianship council, and what did they say? They said that if they went there, they would go with the police. Her mother didn't want that, of course. So, do you know who helped this woman? I, I helped. An elderly assistant and I. An elderly assistant and I went there and helped this mother and child.

Through this story, Pastor Ivo makes clear to those who listen to him the importance of the Guardianship Council in the lives of some individuals in the community. However, he has yet to demonstrate the more general relevance of

13 *Conselho Tutelar*, translated here as Guardianship Council, is the office responsible for overseeing compliance with the rights of children and adolescents.

this election, even to those who believe they will never personally need this office's assistance. For this, he returns to one of the great discussions of the presidential election of the previous year.

There are a lot of kids in this situation, who are sweet, and they're exposed to things they shouldn't. She's sweet, she needs God and not the police... Our children are innocent and sweet, they shouldn't be exposed to these gender ideology things... They need people to take care of them. Did you know that there is no woman in the guardianship council of that city? No women. We need a woman to help our children and their mothers.

To make it clear who this ideal woman would be for the position, flyers with the church-supported candidate's photo and election number were distributed to people while they left the church. In addition, the pastor also spoke directly about the candidate during services, saying that it was possible to trust her to "protect the children" and to be against "this gender ideology that we have seen around".

Similar words and arguments were echoed by Bishop Ossessio – who was supported by the UCKG for his re-election to federal Congress in 2018, as shown above. Bishop Ossessio visited this small temple in Recife in 2019, just weeks before the election, along with the UCKG-supported local guardianship council candidate. He went up to the altar at the end of a Sunday meeting to speak to that community. His speech was divided into three sections: the first section was a thanksgiving, the second spoke to a "better future", and the last one was about having "faith in the present". His first words as he climbed the altar were, "I'm here to give thanks. Thank you for your vote, thank you to the people you convinced to vote for me, thank you for defending me and defending the church when people spoke ill of us." Following this section, he introduced the candidate for the guardianship council personally and spoke about the need to "protect our children". In the end, without directly speaking the name of President Jair Bolsonaro, he declared that those present were witnessing a historic moment because "we have someone that we could consecrate to God. It's not the time to doubt him; it's the time to pray for a better country."

In Bishop Ossessio's speech, it is possible to recognize the different political institutional levels in which the Universal Church has been working. They

are not limited to alliances with the executive power and to electing congressmen. They also elect church-related executive candidates, such as Marcelo Crivella as Rio de Janeiro's mayor, and they influence the election of small local institutions such as the Guardianship Council. However, these different levels of action are intensely connected, at least in the current scenario.

One of the biggest discussions surrounding the 2018 elections was about what would be appropriate in terms of institutional education on gender and sexuality. This theme, as highlighted at the beginning of this section, was one of the discussions that made Jair Bolsonaro famous a few years before he was elected president. The current president and the majority of Congress representatives linked to the so-called "evangelical caucus" were in favor of not introducing this topic in any way at school and argued that it should be the family's responsibility to talk to children about issues related to sexuality. They also considered any kind of actions against bullying suffered by non-heteronormative children as "gender ideology". During his campaign, Bolsonaro publicized how voting for him was voting for an "anti-gender ideology" program. Likewise, congressman Bishop Ossessio, when he visited the small temple where I was doing my fieldwork and delivered his speech in support of the local candidate for the Guardianship Council, stated: "We have to protect our children against this terrible gender ideology".

During the campaign, the main example of a child who needed protection used by Pastor Ivo was the case of the girl helped by the church community, but it is important to understand where this case is localized. To do so, let us return to Agamben (2005). This author famously locates sovereignty in the exception. Exception here is not existence prior to the norm, but the threshold between right and fact that are contained in the norm itself. Thus, the sovereign power is the one that can recognize, act, and resolve the exception. When Pastor Ivo says that he was the alternative one mother found to the State, he is highlighting this difference between the right and the lived, and it is in this context that the Pentecostal churches become highly reliable institutions for populations that find themselves in the middle space between the law and politics.

It is through illuminating these connections that we can understand the importance evangelicals give to President Jair Bolsonaro's approximations and to his visit to the Temple of Solomon. Bolsonaro met Edir Macedo in person for the first time after becoming elected in a visit that he made to the Temple of

Solomon. In an interview, he stated that when Edir Macedo called him to say he was in Brazil and that they should meet, Bolsonaro stated that he should be the one going to Macedo, by which he meant at the Temple of Solomon. On that visit, the president participated in the Temple of Solomon tour, attended a service, and received a Bible as a present from Edir Macedo, who told him: “This is God’s thinking. One who follows God’s thinking becomes one with God. It doesn’t matter that you have all the power, that you have all the authority, if you don’t have God’s thinking. This is the biggest present I can give to you” (Jair..., 2019).

Furthermore, during the service, Edir Macedo “consecrated” Bolsonaro. This means that Macedo anointed the president with oil and prayed for God to bless him by stating, among other words: “that he might be wise, intelligent, and brave, that he might have spirit, health, strength, and vigor to turn this country into a new Brazil my lord, because that is our faith my lord”. About this ritual Macedo stated: “praying for him I am praying for 210 million Brazilians” (Jair..., 2019).

Within the most recent democratic framework, the Universal Church has always been available for relations with the candidates who were closest to being elected and with the presidents already elected. What changed most in this picture was the way and the degree to which the presidents accepted this support. Lula established strong relations, Dilma symbolically invited Edir Macedo to her inauguration ceremony, Bolsonaro was consecrated by him in the Temple of Solomon. Moreover, these are just symbolic moments that are most evident after the whole process of approximations, changes and restructuring that make these alliances possible.

Nevertheless, to my interlocutors the approximation with Bolsonaro goes beyond its political significance. During my fieldwork, I heard statements similar to the following by Mrs. Fabiana: “When did a president accept this before? This government is blessed.” More than a political alliance, the consecration of the president in the Temple of Solomon is seen as a sign of divine power and protection. It is a sign that in the country where God’s people live there is a political alliance against evil and its influence in politics, though the country is still “possessed by demons”.

If one of the UCKG’s only constancies, in terms of politics, was to form alliances with those in power, the great difference in the current situation is expressed in the words of my interlocutor above. Her enthusiasm shows that

this alliance is no longer only political but became personal from the moment when Jair Bolsonaro introduced himself to the evangelical population not only as an ally, but as one of them – having his marriage celebrated by Silas Malafaia, being baptized by Pastor Everaldo at the Jordan river, and being consecrated by Bishop Edir Macedo. He comes to be seen as part of the fight for good against evil, as described by my interlocutor. This is the same battle that Congressman Bishop Ossessio is fighting in Congress and that Pastor Ivo is fighting in a small community on the outskirts of Recife.

Concluding

This article tried to shed some light on the meaning of the interconnection of evangelicals, and especially the Universal Church, with politics in Brazil's current democratic phase. If in the last years this group's support for Bolsonaro's presidency has been particularly conspicuous, it does not mean that their participation in politics, or even advocacy for the group in the center of power, is a new phenomenon. When the Universal Church debuted in politics, Protestant churches in Brazil had already enacted the whole discussion of whether involvement in politics was appropriate or not, and different sectors had found different answers. In fact, by the time the UCKG was founded, the strong divide between faith and politics in Brazilian Protestantism, and all the trauma caused by it, were part of a past that could be simultaneously ignored and inherited. Together with Brazil's new democratic phase, this meant that the UCKG could commence its participation in institutional politics as something that would not be intrinsically problematic.¹⁴

If the persistence of the religious in the political is no longer new (Marshall, 2010), Ali Agrama (2010) demonstrates how the State itself confuses religion and politics. For him, secularism is “a set of processes and structures of power where the question of where to draw the lines between religion and politics continues to be raised and has acquired a distinctive salience” (Agrama, 2010, p. 500). In other words, we cannot speak about approximations because

14 I discuss this process in detail in Sá Leitão (2021).

religion and politics have a series of developments between them, and we cannot attribute stable meanings to these terms. What Ali Agrama (2010) calls the arbitration of the State can also be understood in terms of the assemblage that forms sovereignty, including the resonance machine that is part of it. In other words, the definition of terms such as religion and politics is as porous and unstable as sovereignty itself.

It is true that leaders of churches like the UCKG do not fall far from understanding what Ali Agrama (2010) is analyzing. Nevertheless, what we also cannot lose sight of is that their active engagement in the public sphere is constitutive of this religious group's understanding of the world. The fact that evangelical groups are part of the current conservative conjuncture does not mean that they are conservative agents who have just assumed a role in national politics, or that they are necessarily a threat to the secular state. The relationship between evangelicals and politics in Brazil is not new. In conservative, dictatorial, or liberal periods, this relationship existed. More than just evangelical churches, a conservative society is articulated through what William Connolly (2005) calls a resonance machine. No wonder, then, that denominations that present themselves as inclusive in other countries, in Brazil still do not accept same-sex marriage or women's leadership.

Nevertheless, it is also important not to forget that this mode of articulation, in the recent past, has resulted in significant political activism regarding women's rights. In 2018, one of my interlocutors told me with some pride that she had often heard: "you seem more feminists than pastor's wives". Although this demonstrates the lasting results of more "progressive" actions seen in the UCKG during the pre-2016 fieldwork, I do not minimize here the current scenario, in which UCKG members believe they are blessing the current government, not only supporting it. What I am trying to make clear is that we could also see changes happening inside churches such as the UCKG concomitant with the changes we witnessed in Brazilian politics, and that these made possible an alignment with the current government with more intensity than with the ones before.

A straighter line was drawn from Bolsonaro to Pastor Ivo in the small church, passing through Bishop Ossessio. Within these parallels, what is a man of God and what is a competent politician are approximated. Bishop Ossessio deserves to receive your vote not only because of projects and law-

making he had been working on in the previous four years, but because he is so close to God that he is able to exorcize demons. The power of the UCKG candidates to perform exorcisms is not only for show, it is their proof that in a space dominated by evil – as they understand politics to be – they are sending people capable to fight the devil's misdeeds. If Bishop Ossessio's capacity to expel the devil is an important asset to be taken to Congress, having a president who accepts being blessed by Edir Macedo – as well as by other well-known pastors and priests – is to take this asset to the executive power. For my interlocutors, Bolsonaro's election was about finally having a government in God's name during the democratic period.

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