

# **Bolsonarism, 'Immanentist Pentecostalism', and the Future of Religion and Politics in Brazil**

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## **Abstract:**

This article introduces "Immanentist Pentecostalism" (IP) to analyse the complex relationship between Bolsonaroism and (Neo)Pentecostalism in Brazil. Based on in-depth interviews in Belo Horizonte, IP is defined as a lived theology characterised by a direct, constant relationship with an immanent divine active in all worldly life. The ethnographic findings reveal the primacy of personal faith over institutional loyalty; overt political discourse is largely absent from these accounts. The article argues that the link between IP and Bolsonaroism is not direct ideological command but one of affective alignment. Bolsonaroism's political imaginary, its moral dualism and messianic leadership, resonates with the pre-existing spiritual dispositions of believers. This dynamic, which re-embeds spirituality in human experience, re-enchants politics from within Charles Taylor's "immanent frame," representing not a pre-modern revival but an exhaustion of a modern logic.

**Keywords:** Bolsonaroism, Pentecostalism, Far-right ideologies, Lived Religion, Religious Innovations, Brazil

## **Introduction: Brazilian religious and political context**

This article explores the complex relationship between Bolsonarism, a far-right political movement centred around the figure of Jair Bolsonaro, marked by nationalism, conservative moralism, and anti-establishment populism, and Immanentist Pentecostalism (IP), a concept we introduce to describe a politically engaged strand of Pentecostalism that fuses spiritual practice with political action in a lived, embodied way. Bolsonarism is not unique and sits in a broader spectrum of political and cultural phenomena, blending religions with politics. It is also important to remember that Brazilian society is not Western in the sense of the intended clear separation between sacred and profane - Brazilian culture has long been shaped by a worldview in which the sacred and the profane intertwine. Spirit possession plays a central role in mediating between them. As noted by Bastide (1978) and DaMatta (1997), this logic of embodiment and immediacy extends beyond Afro-Brazilian religions into everyday practices, popular festivals, and forms of healing and performance. Pentecostalism connects to this spiritual grammar by translating the experience of possession into the Christian imaginary - rather than rejecting local cosmologies, it reframes them, shifting the acting divine presence from the Orixás to the Holy Spirit. In this sense, Pentecostalism's resonance in Brazil lies less in rupture than in its ability to inhabit and redirect deeply rooted cultural forms of spirituality.

While Bolsonarism is a widely used term, IP offers a new analytical framework to understand how specific Pentecostal communities integrate faith and politics. Unlike more institutionalised religious-political projects, such as Dominion Theology or The New Apostolic Reformation (Garrard, 2020), IP should be understood instead from an 'ordinary theology' (Astley, 2002) perspective, focusing on the everyday spiritualisation of 'mundane' activities in the political context. Drawing on a series of in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted with Pentecostal believers in Belo Horizonte between 2019 and 2022, this article argues that the connection between Bolsonarism and Pentecostalism is better understood not as an ideological pact but as a form of affective alignment. This article highlights the role of Immanentist Pentecostalism in legitimising and sustaining Bolsonarism's broader political project while also acknowledging the internal heterogeneity of Brazilian Pentecostalism. The article also aims to conceptualise Immanentist Pentecostalism as a

socio-theological innovation that should be contextualised beyond Brazil and beyond its current conservative political applications.

To understand this dynamic, this article draws on two key concepts: Marshall Sahlins's 'reverse movement' (2022) from transcendence to immanence, where spirituality is no longer confined to the private sphere but is re-embedded in everyday public-related practices, shaping political action and social structures; and Charles Taylor's we take the immanent frame to name the modern social imaginary in which public reason, institutions, and ordinary experience are organised as if meaning and fullness were secured within a closed, this-worldly order. Bolsonarism, it is argued, does not break out of this frame but rather re-enchants it from within, saturating the political sphere with a sacred charge.

The central thesis of this article is therefore twofold. First, it posits that IP, as an observable mode of lived religion, precedes and is independent of Bolsonarism. Second, it argues that Bolsonarism's political success with this demographic stems from its ability to create a narrative that resonates deeply with the affective and moral structure of this pre-existing spiritual worldview and offers a political language for an existential reality already felt and lived by millions of believers.

### **What is Bolsonarism?**

Brazil's political trajectory in recent decades has been marked by significant transformations, beginning with transitioning from a military dictatorship, which lasted from 1964 to 1985, to establishing a democratic government. This period of democratisation was followed by the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a leader of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), who served as President from 2003 to 2011. Lula's presidency represented a shift toward a soft-left political orientation, focusing on social programs and policies to reduce inequality. His successor, Dilma Rousseff, also from the Workers' Party, partially continued these policies until her controversial impeachment and removal from office in 2016, an event that sparked significant political debate and was viewed by many as a politically motivated move.

The election of Jair Bolsonaro (his supporters occasionally refer to his middle name, "Messias" (Messiah) to frame him as the saviour of the Brazilian people) in 2018 marked a stark turn to the right, as Bolsonaro's administration pursued conservative, neoliberal, and nationalist policies. The phenomenon unfolding in Brazil under the name of Bolsonarism is neither exclusively Brazilian nor entirely novel. Anthropologist Isabela Kalil (2018) notes that while Bolsonaro's early supporters were predominantly young men, his base diversified as his campaign progressed. An essential discursive tool in this process was the creation of the figure of the 'cidadao de bem', or 'good citizen' - someone who displays 'correct' individual behaviour, follows societal norms and laws, and stands in opposition to 'communists', 'petistas' (supporters of the Workers' Party - PT), and 'left-wingers', who are framed as corrupt and work-shy. Critics of the PT became so vociferous that the term "antipetismo" entered common parlance. Bolsonaro incorporated this into his political brand (Reis, 2021). The right, and Bolsonaro in particular, has portrayed the PT years as a corrupt era whose policies favoured only minorities and select groups (Gracino et al., 2021). The PT's diminished credibility opened up a space for conservative evangelical political discourse (Gracino et al., 2021). Araújo's (2022) findings show that Pentecostal antipetismo in Brazil is not a temporary electoral reaction but a deeper cultural formation rooted in moral and religious worldviews. The rejection of the Workers' Party (PT) emerges less from economic dissatisfaction than from a symbolic conflict over values, identity, and the perceived moral order. We argue that IP operates as an interpretive framework that moralises politics, framing the PT as the embodiment of secular and "anti-family" agendas. This moralised polarisation, sustained even among beneficiaries of PT social programs, positions IP as a key cultural foundation of Brazil's contemporary right-wing politics and as a paradigmatic case of how religion reshapes political belonging in postsecular societies.

This notion of the 'good citizen' is flexible enough to resonate with various groups, including conservative religious ones, as it encompasses multiple meanings and worldviews. In this narrative, corruption is understood not just in the narrow sense of politicians stealing from the people but as a moral rot infecting customs, traditions, values, and sexuality. The 'good citizen' is thus a moral exemplar in both their private life and public political demands, imbued with a sense of religious

legitimacy. This is where we can start to see how IP functions. This narrative mirrors the way U.S. conservative religious voters describe themselves as 'Values Voters', suggesting that their divinely-backed morals make their political choices inherently superior.

Ronaldo de Almeida's article 'Bolsonaro presidente: conservadorismo, evangelismo e a crise brasileira' (2019) offers an in-depth analysis of how Brazil's evangelical community, alongside a broader conservative surge, propelled Jair Bolsonaro to power in 2018. His study of this evangelical-conservative alliance provides an essential lens for understanding how Bolsonaro won the elections. However, to fully understand the phenomenon of Bolsonarism, it is critical to move beyond a purely ideological analysis and consider the strategic re-entanglement of religion and politics it represents. We argue that Bolsonarism blurs the boundaries between the spiritual and the mundane, the private and the public (Hunter & Power, 2019). In contrast to liberal and socialist political movements with roots in the late-19th century that prioritised material concerns and relegated spirituality to the private sphere (Casanova, 1994; Asad, 2003), Bolsonarism embraces and intertwines these domains, creating a sense of wholeness and meaning for its adherents (Feltran, 2020; Pinheiro-Machado, 2019). This holistic approach is evident in the way Bolsonarism draws on elements of Pentecostal discourse and practice, such as, a conservative moral agenda focused on "family values," and a dualistic worldview that frames political opponents as agents of evil (Mariano, 1999; Burity, 2006; Lacerda, 2018).

During his first presidential campaign (2018), Bolsonaro adopted the slogan *Brasil acima de tudo, Deus acima de todos* (Brazil above everything, God above everyone). Eventually, evangelical leaders became critical backers of Bolsonaro and stayed as his allies. Silas Malafaia, leader of the Assembly of God Vitória em Cristo, declared in an interview with BBC News in São Paulo: "The Church does not support anyone. We evangelicals do. [...] We are going to support the president. There is no doubt about it." This narrative positioned Bolsonaro as above politics, a defender of the faithful: "When I talk about possible slavery, we are defending the freedom of the people. Let us pray at the place (of

the act), asking God to deliver us from communism. If communism is implanted, freedom will surely go away." (Lemos, 2021)

Bolsonaro's 2021 UN General Assembly speech further aligned him with religious discourse. He claimed that the media misrepresented Brazil's reality and that it had improved under his leadership. Before this speech, he met with key evangelical supporters like Silas Malafaia, Rene Terra Nova (Mision Cristiana Elim Internacional), and Samuel Munguba Junior (Igreja Batista Comunidade do Amor), stating that the next election would result in his arrest, death, or victory and that only God could remove him from office.

Within the government, Bolsonarism functioned as a coalition of different factions: (a) the ideological wing, heavily influenced by Olavo de Carvalho; (b) the military wing, led by Vice President Hamilton Mourão<sup>1</sup>; (c) the neoliberal economic wing, represented by Paulo Guedes; (d) the agribusiness-linked 'ruralist wing'; and (e) the neo-Pentecostal religious wing, including Ministers Damare Alves, André Mendonça and Milton Ribeiro, and influential pastors like Edir Macedo and Silas Malafaia. However, this coalition has proven fragile, with each wing experiencing setbacks and internal tensions. The ideological wing has been weakened by departures (and especially the death of de Carvalho) and investigations into fake news and anti-democratic activities; the military's support appears to have waned; the economic wing struggled to implement its agenda amid the pressures of the pandemic; the ruralist wing is divided between producers who back Bolsonaro and distributors wary of trade repercussions; and there are growing tensions between pro-Bolsonaro pastors and the broader Pentecostal movement. Pentecostal pastors and communities have increasingly questioned the instrumental use of faith and the exclusive emphasis on moral agendas, advocating instead for a platform oriented toward social justice and theological plurality. Qualitative studies (such as those published in *Mediaciones* and *Plural/USP*) document these internal dissensions and the emergence of

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Harris and Andres Schipani (2020) "Bolsonaro and the generals: will the military defend Brazil's democracy?" Available online: <https://on.ft.com/3ktC32J> (accessed 12.04.2024)

networks of “left-leaning evangelicals,” signalling a process of repositioning within the religious field (Ionova, 2022).

Public incidents reinforce this trend: “failed prophecies” concerning Bolsonaro’s victory, scandals involving pastors close to the government (such as Gilmar Santos and Arilton Moura in the Ministry of Education), and the perception of political favouritism have generated internal criticism and growing discontent among believers. Opinion polls, such as those conducted by Datafolha, also reveal that a significant share of evangelicals—around one-third—rated the government negatively, suggesting that pastoral endorsement does not translate into unanimous support at the grassroots level. Thus, the contemporary Pentecostal field is marked by symbolic and political disputes that challenge the authority of Bolsonaro-aligned leaders and reconfigure the religious public sphere in post-2018 Brazil (Lazarou, 2021).

In 2022, the political pendulum swung back (slightly) with Lula's return to the presidency, signalling a renewed soft embrace of left-leaning policies in Brazil's ongoing political evolution (Borges, 2022). However, the municipal elections in 2024 demonstrate the fundamental weakness of the Brazilian left, the stable and strong position of Bolsonarists and the dominance of ‘centrao’, a broad spectrum of right-wing parties characterised by a transactional approach to politics (Wilson Centre, 2024). The elections of 2024 confirm the significant presence of Pentecostal churches - and other religious groups - in the political discourse. (Reuters, 2024; Rest of World, 2024).

### **What is ‘immanentist Pentecostalism’?**

The Brazilian religious context has also dramatically transformed over the last half of a century - while at the beginning of 1970, Brazil still could be described as a catholic country, the (preliminary) results of the 2022 Brazilian Census shows a very different image - the distribution of religious affiliation among individuals aged ten and older is as follows: Catholics: 56.7%, Evangelicals: 26.9%, No religion: 9.3%, Afro-Brazilian: 1.0%, Spiritism: 1.8%. Some research (Alves, 2020) suggests that, in the third decade of the 21st century, less than 50% of Brazilian society will describe themselves as

Catholics. Pentecostalism has become one of Brazil's most socially, culturally and politically influential religious movements, with a rapidly expanding and diverse constellation of churches. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2010), an astonishing 14,000 evangelical churches are opened in the country each year. While they may differ in specific doctrinal details, many Pentecostal churches share a common emphasis on the socio-economic mobilisation of their members. Some churches are deeply engaged in politics, while others reject political involvement; some have a heterogeneous membership that cuts across social classes, while others have a more homogeneous demographic. This internal diversity is often overlooked in media portrayals of Brazilian Pentecostalism (Rivera, 2016; Lacerda, 2018).

Immanentist Pentecostalism (IP) refers to the strands of Brazilian Pentecostalism that have evolved beyond traditional theological frameworks, embedding spiritual beliefs within everyday socio-political life in an embodied and lived manner. Unlike Dominion Theology, which seeks to institutionally impose Christian governance over society by capturing key cultural, political, and economic spheres, IP does not primarily operate through formal power structures. Instead, it manifests as an affective and experiential fusion of faith and politics, where political acts, voting, protesting, and governance are understood as direct expressions of spiritual warfare and divine presence. In this framework, Bolsonaro is not merely a politician supported by evangelical leaders but is sacralised as an instrument of God, and his governance is seen as an extension of believers' spiritual struggle<sup>2</sup>. The interviews conducted in Belo Horizonte reveal a consistent and richly textured worldview that gives substance to the IP framework. This lived theology is defined by three core features: the perception of an immanent divine woven into the fabric of daily life; a profound sense of personal autonomy and scepticism toward institutional authority; and a fluid, pragmatic approach to church affiliation. These characteristics, taken together, paint a picture of a religious landscape far more complex and individualised than is often assumed in political analyses.

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<sup>2</sup> Jair Bolsonaro being anointed by Edir Macedo in a ceremony at the Temple of Solomon: <https://economia.uol.com.br/videos/?id=bolsonaro-recebe-uncao-do-bispo-edir-macedo-em-templo-evangelico-04028D183166E4B16326> (access 17th October 2025)



The most fundamental characteristic of IP is the collapse of the distinction between sacred and profane spaces and times. For the believers interviewed, God is not a remote deity encountered only within the four walls of a church but a constant, interactive presence in all aspects of life. M. emphatically states that she feels God's presence not just at home or in church, but "Anywhere". V. echoes this sentiment, asserting that "you must see God in everywhere, in every moment", a belief shared by A-R., who declares, "Where I am, Jesus is with me". This sense of divine omnipresence extends to a feeling of protection even in threatening circumstances. W., who no longer attends church, describes the feeling that "God is with us" even when passing through dangerous places, a belief forged during a time when she was "alone on the farm, in the middle of the backwoods". This omnipresence makes the home, rather than the church, the primary site of spiritual experience for many. M. describes her home as a place that "brings me peace, love and happiness". M-L., who attends church only occasionally, finds her most profound connection to God "Here on my couch, midnight on my knees". Similarly, T. feels closest to God not in a congregation but when he is "alone, in my room, at night sitting with 'my knee' on the floor", a practice shared by G., who feels closest to God in her room and D., who also prays in her room. For I. the physical location is irrelevant: "I think that the place isn't important, only my belief". The relationship with this immanent divine is conversational and intimate. V. admits, "I like to talk a lot to God, I complain a lot to him in truth", while T. explains, "I talk in thought with Him". This is not a distant, transcendent deity to be formally worshipped, but an immanent interlocutor who is a constant partner in the narrative of daily life. This lived theology perfectly illustrates belief operating within Taylor's immanent frame. The primary goal is not salvation in a transcendent afterlife but protection, guidance, and meaning in this world, here and now.

A second defining feature of IP, and one that directly challenges the notion of a monolithic, pastor-led voting bloc, is the emphasis on individual conscience and a corresponding scepticism toward institutional and clerical authority. The interviews are replete with declarations of spiritual autonomy. G. provides the most definitive statement of this principle: "I always follow, but I do not follow the

pastor, I follow what is written". This prioritisation of personal interpretation of scripture over clerical direction is a crucial finding.

This autonomy extends to a critical stance on church doctrines and rules, often dismissed as man-made "habits" or "irrelevant things". P., an attendee of the Universal Church, locates religious authority not in the Bible or the pastor, but "in my thought". She explicitly rejects church teachings she finds disagreeable, particularly regarding dress codes, stating, "If I feel good with myself doing I will not stop doing it because the Church said that I shouldn't do". D., voices a similar sentiment, arguing that her "intimacy with Him has nothing to do with the Church" and that the institution should not interfere in "how you choose to live our lives". A-R., a devout churchgoer for 37 years, distinguishes between her faith and church customs, especially regarding clothing: "For me, Jesus doesn't change, people change, but Jesus doesn't". Numerous other interviewees express disagreements with church teachings, whether on the intolerance of different religions, rigid rules about appearance, or, in M-L's case, "a lot of things" she prefers not to specify. V., powerfully explained that her connection with God is not confined to a sacred building but is an ever-present reality: "It can be anywhere, sometimes I close my bedroom door and it's just me and God, even when I'm in the bathroom taking a shower".

The third feature of IP is a fluid and pragmatic approach to institutional affiliation, which deconstructs the idea of stable church membership. For many believers, the choice of which church to attend is driven by practical considerations rather than deep theological commitments. M., for example, attends the Deus é Amor church primarily because her original church, the Universal Church, is now "a bit far for me". This logistical rationale highlights the instrumental view many take toward religious institutions.

This pragmatism gives rise to a "floating" membership. Despite attending Deus é Amor for three years, M. still considers herself "from the Universal Church" and describes herself as a mere "visitor" at her current congregation, feeling no sense of community there. This sense of provisional and partial belonging is widespread. Many who identify strongly as people of faith have lapsed in their attendance altogether. W. stopped going to church after experiencing "many disappointments"; Thales cites his "very rushed" life as the reason for his non-attendance; and D. points to time constraints and

"parallel conversations in the church". Yet, for all of them, this disengagement from the institution does not diminish their self-identification as believers. This fluidity demonstrates that the formal church as an institution has a much weaker hold on believers' lives than is often assumed. It is a resource to be used, a place to visit, or a community to join temporarily, but it is not the exclusive source of religious identity or experience. This has profound implications for political mobilisation. A political movement cannot rely on capturing a loyal audience in the pews, because that audience is constantly shifting. Instead, it must craft a message that appeals to believers' personal, immanent faith, reaching them in their homes, their workplaces, and their private thoughts, the primary sites of their spiritual lives.

These voices provide powerful support for the article's claim of a 'shaky' alliance between Pentecostalism and Bolsonarism. It strongly suggests that pastoral endorsements are not received passively but are actively filtered through the believer's personal conscience, their direct relationship with God, and their own interpretation of scripture. Political mobilisation within this community cannot, therefore, be a simple top-down command; it must appeal to the sovereign judgment of the individual believer. This dynamic reveals that Immanentist Pentecostalism is not a pre-modern, collectivist phenomenon. On the contrary, its emphasis on individual conscience, personal experience, and pragmatic choice marks it as a quintessentially modern form of religiosity. The self becomes the ultimate arbiter of spiritual truth, constructing a personalised faith by selecting elements from available institutional offerings. This understanding reinforces the engagement with Taylor's work, framing IP not as a retreat from modernity but as a distinctively modern form of enchanted immanence.

Dominion Theology, which has shaped some of the neo-Pentecostal churches like the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD), is rooted in the belief that Christians must "take dominion" over society by influencing the so-called Seven Mountains of Culture (government, media, education, economy, religion, family, and arts). This top-down theological framework seeks to create an explicitly Christian society, often through strategic political engagement and media control. By

contrast, Immanentist Pentecostalism does not necessarily pursue institutional conquest but instead transforms believers' everyday practices into acts of divine significance. It sacralises the immediacy of (political) engagement, making governance not just an instrument for religious interests but a spiritual reality in itself.

Sahlins helps recover worlds where the sacred is ontologically pervasive; their move is anti-modern in that it multiplies ontologies. Taylor names the modern counter-condition: an immanent frame that can be "open" or "closed" to transcendence but in practice organises life as if immanence suffices. Our claim is precise: Bolsonarism is enchanted but closed immanence. It performs rupture with modernity, yet deepens modernity's core by demanding a single, totalising moral order enforced by state power. This also clarifies that IP is not Dominion Theology's institutional conquest; it is an affective ethic wherein voting, protest, and governance are experienced as immediate spiritual acts. That experiential fusion re-enchants politics without breaching the immanent frame. In Taylor's terms, Bolsonarism weaponises modern cross-pressures, the ache for transcendence inside a closed world, translating them into resentment and moral panic rather than genuine openness. Thus, while Sahlins points to plural worlds, Bolsonarism imposes one world. The resemblance to anti-modern critique is mimetic, not substantive.

In the Brazilian context, Immanentist Pentecostalism emerged through the complex interplay of politics, social movements, and religious shifts since the mid-20th century. The country's laicisation process never fully separated religion from public life; instead, it created conditions where religious influence could take new and unofficial forms. Unlike traditional Catholic political engagements, which historically mediated between religious and secular domains, IP collapses these distinctions entirely, ensuring that political choices, economic policies, and moral struggles are framed as acts of faith.

Where Dominion Theology builds a blueprint for societal transformation, IP dissolves the boundary between the spiritual and the secular by embedding divine presence within political life itself. It does

not seek to dominate the state from above but to infuse politics with religious meaning from below. Bolsonaro, in this vision, is not just a political leader favoured by evangelicals but a manifestation of divine will actively shaping national destiny. The state is not merely an arena for policy—it becomes a site of spiritual warfare, where divine forces are believed to be at play in every political struggle.

However, there is an intimate relationship between Dominion Theology and IP. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD) was a key pillar of support for President Jair Bolsonaro. It is essential to mention that the number of worshipers in IURD is relatively small (estimated at around 10% of all Pentecostals in Brazil), but its visibility is much greater. Its leader is a vocal supporter of Dominion Theology (Garrard, 2020). However, the church's emphasis on moral conduct and eschatology has produced a large "floating" membership with little incentive for long-term commitment beyond the pay-per-service model (Mochel, 2023). This 'floating membership' is not necessarily bad for the Church, as the 'floating worshippers' influence other religious groups, expanding IURD's cloud beyond the Church itself. The IURD's dualistic, territorial approach to spiritual warfare and its transactional approach to blessings have led some scholars to label it "pseudo-Pentecostal" (Franco, 2007) and some followers of other Evangelical churches to question if IURD is a Christian church. Our 'Immanentist Pentecostalism' term focuses on innovative elements of religious practices and beliefs and allows us to analyse religious worldviews and practices 'bottom-up', going beyond any specific Church. Our extensive fieldwork between 2019 and 2022 (partly during the COVID-19 pandemic) surprisingly showed us that IURD-related references are present in religious imaginaries of Pentecostals, being highly critical of the Church itself. As we argued in our earlier article (Cavalcanti de Arruda, et al, 2022), based on an extensive ethnographic study of IURD families (in the context of IURD, 'families' are groups of believers with shared roles or interests, fostering belonging and organising church activities), politics is rarely discussed between elections. Instead, the vision of the ideal 'Pentecostal world' is gradually being infused in every conversation, making it extremely easy to mobilise believers when political action is needed. However, it is also crucial to recognise the diversity within Brazilian Pentecostalism, where not all churches align with Bolsonarism and where there remains significant debate over the proper role of religion in public life.

### **Do Brazilian Pentecostals really support Bolsonarism?**

Pentecostals and evangelicals in Brazil largely abstained from political engagement until the 1980s (Gracino et al., 2021). This began to change with the election of twelve evangelical federal deputies in 1982. While Pentecostals do not make up most of the Brazilian electorate, their tendency to vote as a bloc has made them a crucial component of any successful electoral coalition. The remarkable growth of the evangelical population in the country over the past 20 years and its increasing involvement in public life have created the conditions for religious language and references to permeate different secular spheres, especially politics. Pentecostals played an essential role in the new political and social landscape that emerged following Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016, working to position religious conservatism at its core, echoing the role played by the Catholic Church during the 1964 military coup (Gracino et al., 2021).

Bolsonarism recognised this shift and utilised religion to bolster conservative themes in his agenda, centred on moral values and traditional principles. Furthermore, they integrated elements of discourse and narratives based on the notion of spiritual warfare, which encourages taking proactive measures in the world to "correct" what is perceived as wrong. Nevertheless, key religious leaders who would become stalwart Bolsonaro allies, such as Silas Malafaia, declared their support late in the campaign. Bolsonaro was neither the instinctive choice nor the initial favourite of evangelicals. Notably, at the start of the 2018 presidential campaign, evangelical support for Bolsonaro was relatively low, even trailing that of Lula.

The relationship between Bolsonarism and Pentecostalism is far from a straightforward alliance. Instead, it is a complex and often 'shaky' partnership characterised by both convergence and tension. The profound heterogeneity within both movements shapes this alliance—Bolsonarism's various ideological factions and the diverse theological and political orientations within Brazilian Pentecostalism. This divergence can be seen in the fluctuating evangelical support for Bolsonaro,

influenced by economic conditions, political scandals, and theological debates within the Pentecostal field.

Studies examining the correlation between Pentecostal growth and the presidential election have highlighted the concentration of Bolsonaro's votes among evangelicals and the geographic overlap, at a national level, between pro-Bolsonaro votes and areas with the highest proportion of evangelicals (Machado, Mariz, & Carranza, 2021). Synthesising data conducted by polling institutes Datafolha and IBOPE, Fonseca (2018, cited in Machado, Maria & Carranza, 2021, p.18) estimates that in the second round of the 2018 election, "Bolsonaro obtained around 20 million votes and Haddad 10 million" from the "42 million evangelical voters".

A map of Brazil illustrating the geographic distribution of votes in the 2018 presidential election reveals a striking correlation between areas with high concentrations of evangelical voters and support for Bolsonaro. The map, created by Hervé Théry (2019), shows a predominance of pro-Bolsonaro votes in regions that have experienced significant growth in both Pentecostalism and agribusiness, particularly in the peripheral areas of major cities in the southeast. Gracino et al. (2021) argue that while evangelicals are not the only architects of Bolsonaro's victory, they have undoubtedly positioned themselves at the vanguard of the country's ascendant conservative hegemony. Kniess and Santos (2020) research concerns responses to the question: "The support of the faithful to the need for a leader to solve the crisis, even if it is necessary to disrespect the laws and institutions?" According to their research, while historical Protestants are divided between those who disagree with the statement and those who agree with it, the category 'Other Evangelical Faithful' demonstrates that individuals in this group tend to disagree with the phrase (55% say they disagree a lot or a little). Among evangelicals of any of the three waves of Pentecostalism, it is noted that there is a gradual increase, from the first wave to the third, of those who agree with the need for a strong leader to solve the crisis. The authors admit that the results of their research are inconclusive, as socio-economic status seems more important for 'authorisation inclinations'; still, the authors identify a predisposition among Pentecostal evangelicals, especially in neo-Pentecostal denominations, to support the need for a strong

leader. This is attributed to the centrality of religious leaders and the hierarchical internal structure of Pentecostal churches, particularly in the cases of Edir Macedo (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), R.R. Soares (International Church of God's Grace), and Valdomiro Santiago (World Church of God's Power). As Pentecostal support for the highly popular former President Lula demonstrates, a 'strong leader' is not necessarily synonymous with a far-right leader but rather someone "who can get things done." Burity (2018) suggests that some Pentecostals had ascribed the status of 'Messiah' to Lula before investing their hopes in Bolsonaro. There is also a significant distinction between Pentecostal churches and individual Pentecostal believers. In interviews conducted by the authors in Belo Horizonte in 2019, nearly all interviewees distanced themselves from direct institutional church affiliations, consistently declaring, in various forms: "I attend the church, but I do not belong."

The 2022 presidential elections, narrowly won by Lula, were fiercely contested and followed by tumultuous events as Bolsonaro and many of his supporters refused to accept the results, engaging in coup-like actions, including road blockades and the invasion of the national congress. This outcome significantly impacted the coalition groups: (a) the ideological wing lost direct access to the presidency, limiting their ability to shape policy, though the election of far-right governors and a record number of aligned congresspeople ensures the survival of their agenda; (b) the military, a more heterogeneous group, was less affected, with Lula proposing to rebuild trust through depoliticisation; (c) new Economy Minister Fernando Haddad seeks to balance neoliberal interests with social development and state intervention, facing market pressure; (d) the ruralist caucus expects milder, longer-term impacts, having elected many representatives and enjoying gubernatorial support in critical states despite policy changes. Interestingly, Pentecostal pastors who supported Bolsonaro and heavily criticised Lula in the past went relatively quiet over the last two years. There is no renewed collaboration between Lula and the Pentecostal camp - even if Lula hoped some kind of dialogue was possible - but there is also no open conflict. Some Pentecostal churches are indirectly working with the government on social programs. People like the pastor and congressman Otoni de Paula supported Bolsonaro but were seen around Lula. Still, all these events cause controversies and should be seen as some kind of 'cold peace' relationship.



In summary, while Pentecostals and evangelicals have emerged as a key pillar of Bolsonaro's support base, their relationship with Bolsonarism is complex, dynamic, and not without contradictions. The convergence of Bolsonarism and Pentecostals reflects a conjunction of national and international factors, a realignment of political and moral agendas, and a reconfiguration of social and religious identities. However, as the 2020 and 2024 municipal elections suggest, this alliance is not monolithic or immutable. An interplay of institutional religious affiliations, individual beliefs, socioeconomic realities, and the evolving political landscape shapes the political behaviour of Brazilian Pentecostals. We believe that the Immanentist Pentecostalism conceptual framework helps to understand the nuanced relationship between Pentecostals and far-right politicians. As Brazil looks ahead to the future elections, the question of whether Pentecostals will continue to stand with Bolsonarism or whether new fault lines and alliances will emerge remains open.

### **Conclusion: Immanentist Pentecostalism beyond Bolsonarism**

The relationship between Bolsonarism and Pentecostalism, when viewed through the lens of lived religion, reveals a central paradox: a deeply individualised, anti-institutional, and fluid faith has become the affective bedrock for a populist mass movement. The concept of Immanentist Pentecostalism (IP) is analytically useful precisely because it resolves this. It demonstrates that this individualism is not random but is rooted in a highly particular set of references and a shared symbolic world.

This "particular universe" is not self-generating. As we have argued previously (Cavalcanti de Arruda et al., 2022), neo-Pentecostal institutions, particularly those like the IURD, function as infrastructures for producing a social imaginary. Through their media networks and church practices, they constantly disseminate the core elements of this worldview: moral dualism, a transactional faith, and a world defined by spiritual warfare.

The IP framework thus shifts our analysis. The link to Bolsonarism is not one of direct institutional command, which our ethnographic data shows would be rejected by believers who "follow what is written," not the pastor. Instead, the link is one of compatibility. Bolsonarism succeeded because its political imaginary, a messianic leader battling a demonic "other", provided a perfect political narrative for the same story believers already used to interpret their daily lives. The alignment is effective because Bolsonarism speaks the language of this infrastructurally supported universe. This explains both the potency and the "shakiness" of the alliance. It is not based on institutional loyalty but on Bolsonarism's continued performance of its role within this sacred imaginary. More importantly, this analysis highlights the profound challenge for any political alternative. The difficulty for the Brazilian Left is not simply a matter of policy or economics; it is a matter of translation. Rooted in secular, materialist frameworks, the Left currently lacks the interpretive tools to be legible, let alone persuasive, within this densely enchanted and infrastructurally-maintained symbolic world.

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