This paper addresses the changes in the relations between religion and politics in contemporary Brazil prompted particularly by the entry of Pentecostals into party politics from the mid-80’s on. It seeks to show that the effects of the skyrocketing growth of Pentecostalism and the fiercer inter-religious competition triggered by it extrapolate the religious field to encompass the mediatic and political fields, ultimately affecting the Brazilian public sphere itself. The effect is double: on the one hand, the presence and visibility of religious groups, especially Evangelicals and Catholics, in the country’s public life has been considerably enhanced; on the other, given the significant religious and political capital amassed by Pentecostals in the last few years, candidates and political parties can no longer disregard them as possible allies lest their electoral success be jeopardized. Hence their effort to obtain support from pastoral leaders during elections, in hope of turning these leaders’ religious flocks into an electorate. Simultaneously, representatives can no longer afford not to promise and propose to them joint ‘social’ projects and partnerships. Not without self-interest, thus, Brazilian religious and political institutions and actors have strengthened relations in a reciprocal instrumentalization of religion and politics. As will be seen below, all this was evident in the 2010 presidential election, showing the significant political power exerted by Catholic and Evangelical pressure groups on Brazil’s political class. The religious occupation of the public sphere and the composition of a symbiosis of sorts between religion and politics do not seem to be met with major obstacles in the country’s contemporary public life.

Pluralization of the Brazilian Religious Field: Catholic Contraction and Pentecostal Expansion

Between 1500 and 1822 Brazil was a colony of Portugal, which established and defended Catholicism in the conquered territories. Brazil became
an independent Empire in 1822 and made the Catholic Church the official State religion, standing by its institutional interests and securing its virtual religious monopoly. In 1889, the inception of the Republic led to the juridical separation between State and Church. Even though considered one of the less conflictive in Latin America, the disestablishment in Brazil was decried and resisted by the clergy. The separation nonetheless sprang the Catholic Church from state tutelage, allowing it to submit and report directly to the Vatican, to Romanize, discipline and moralize its cadres, repress its liberal clergy, shape popular Catholicism, beef up its infra-structure, recruit and train new pastoral personnel, and expand its network of seminaries, parishes, dioceses and schools throughout the national territory (Pierucci, 1990:211–219). During the last forty years of the Old Republic, the Church became stronger as a religious institution and locus of political power. In spite of the disestablishment, the Brazilian state kept on privileging the Catholic Church over other, demographically insignificant religious groups: protestant minorities, spiritualists, indigenous and Afro-Brazilian rituals.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, the Brazilian religious field remained dominated by Catholicism, showing little religious diversity. In 1970, the country was 91.1% Catholic. Thirty years later, in 2000, Catholics had decreased to 73.8% of the total population, especially in the metropolitan and more economically developed regions. In the last quarter of the century, Catholic hegemony was disrupted pari passu with re-democratization, the intensification of economic modernization, the mediatization of culture, cultural changes, pluralization of the religious field, and the formation of a religious market. The accelerated expansion of the Pentecostal movement and, more surprisingly, of those without religion has contributed significantly to the receding of Catholicism since the 80’s.

Even with such demographic depletion, Catholics added up to 125.5 million in a universe of 170 million Brazilians in 2000. It should however be noted that, traditionally, most Brazilian Catholics do not attend Catholic cults, nor do they take part in official religious activities, are routinely exposed to ecclesial authorities, or follow their moral, doctrinal and religious guidelines. One could say that Grace Davie’s famous phrase, “to believe without belonging”, has long been true of Brazilian Catholicism. The low participation of the faithful in official cults and their feeble institutionalization is a defining trait of Brazilian Catholicism; not by chance, it has been evocatively defined by Rubem César Fernandes (2005) as a religion of “few priests, few masses, and a lot of festivities”.