CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE SHIFTING MAP OF RELIGIOUS PROCLIVITY IN BRAZIL,
AND HOW THE MEDIA PROSPECT IS SEEMINGLY
UNABLE TO DEAL WITH IT

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Introduction

There is a specter haunting the mainstream media in Brazil: the challenge imposed by the swift and dramatic increase of Evangelical churches in a traditional Catholic country. Some of them are typical cases of reverse mission. We focus on the lack of an appropriate approach, by the mainstream media, to this new phenomenon, and the way the well-established ‘Catholic canon’ in media script is proving itself unable to grasp the real contemporary religious scenario. The chapter deals with what we have concluded to be a certain inability of the media to handle a new phenomenon, namely, the vivid and strong rise of Pentecostalism in a traditional Catholic country. The challenges this new scenario of ‘religious demographics’ pose to mainstream media—itself anchored in the ‘Catholic canon’ and apparently not trained, informed or prepared to grasp this new religious plurality and diversity has created a sort of odd situation.

The transition to democracy, with all appraisals of it merits, despite opening up new channels of mass and political participation, had not assembled too much openness to religious tolerance, especially towards the evangelical newcomers.

The last three decades saw an impressive statistical increase of Evangelical churches, from 6% of all churches in the decades before up to 20.23%. On the other hand, the Catholics decreased from a long-life stable 95% to 68.43%, according to the last census, at the same period (Brazil is still the major Catholic country in number of adherents).¹ The evangelical turn is the highest denominational increase ever seen in Brazil, whether we compare the average growth of all denominations over the last decades, examine the statistics of number of new adherents, or view the swift expansion

¹ Brazilian Demographic Census, POF IBGE, 2009-FGV.
rate of Evangelical confessions. According to the latest statistics on ‘religious changes’ in Brazil there has been a faster development of Evangelical churches compared to any other one between the years 1990 and 2010; moreover, the majority of believers came from the Catholic church. Most of them became Neo-Pentecostals and are internal migrants from rural areas to the periphery of metropolises, in search of new opportunities and social mobility.\(^2\) The data show that the Catholic hegemony in Brazil is threatened by an impressive increase of two groups: the Evangelicals, who rose from 1 million in 1940 to 13 million in 1991, and now constitutes the second major religious denomination, and those who declare themselves “non-religious,” who numbered only 100,000 in the 1940s—less than 0.2% of the population—and has become the third most important group in the 1990s, comprising 6 million people. A projection of the Census 2009 suggests that in a country with a population of 188 million people, the percentage of Evangelicals can be calculated around 33.74 million. Among them, 23.57 million belong to Pentecostal churches.

More important than the absolute percentages, however, according to which Brazil is still a predominantly Catholic country, is the ongoing dynamics of change: the speed, rate of dissemination and amplitude of Pentecostals, particularly in big cities, are already noteworthy and likely to intensify. Even more amazing is the fact that this decrease of Catholics in the country is clearly the result of internal migration: there is a scenario of stability in the rural zones, particularly the north and northeast, traditionally the more underdeveloped areas of the country. The opposite occurs in urban developed zones. It is interesting to note that the two evangelical churches that appear recurrently in the media headlines—the neo-Pentecostals Renascença (Reborn in Christ) and Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, UCKG)—are both a sort of reverse mission. Both were born in Brazil (1986 and 1977 respectively) and rapidly exported their mission to the United States and Europe. In 2010, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God claims an estimated 15 million followers in 200 countries worldwide, with a TV channel and a newspaper, the Folha Universal, which it claims has a weekly print run of 2.5 million. The church claims its leader’s blog receives up to 4 million hits a month. UCKG was established in New York in the 1980s, expanding later to many US cities, and then Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Paraguay, Venezuela, Colombia, Bolivia, Chile, Guatemala, Ecuador, Jamaica, Trinidad,

\(^2\) Brazilian Demographic Census, POF IBGE, 2009-FGV.