

BOOK REVIEW

Smith, Amy Erica. (2019). *Religion and Brazilian Democracy. Mobilizing the People of God*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 222 pages

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In November 2018, Brazil's electorate chose a populist from the radical right as the country's president. Jair Messias Bolsonaro was commonly viewed in international media as Brazil's Donald Trump and conceived of as another strong manifestation of the global rise of the radical populist right. Furthermore, the impression that Brazil had elected its own Trump was strengthened by the fact that Brazilian Evangelical voters supported the presidential candidacy of Jair Bolsonaro in numbers comparable to the Evangelical support of Donald Trump in the US two years before. Nearly 70 % of Brazilian Evangelicals reported in October 2018 that they intended to vote for Jair Bolsonaro in the presidential election (Datafolha 2018).

In order for the history of Brazil's turbulent political events in the 2000s to be written scholarly contributions from various disciplinary angles are surely needed. To understand the period from the Workers' Party's electoral victory in 2002 up until the impeachment of this party's president Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the rise of Bolsonaro a focus on religion's role in politics is particularly useful, given the high levels of reported religiosity in Brazil's vibrant religious economy. Amy Erica Smith's book *Religion and Brazilian Democracy. Mobilizing the People of God* is a thorough and well-sustained documentation of the overlapping of religion and politics in the era leading up to Bolsonaro's electoral victory. This is a timely contribution, both given the rise of the radical right in Latin America's biggest economy but also in light of the lack of English-speaking monographs on the topic of religious influence on Brazilian politics.

The monograph draws on data from a national as well as a local level from 2002 to 2017. That said, it rests heavily on a case study of the general elections of 2014 as observed in the city of Juiz de Fora – located in Minas Gerais and with a population of roughly half a million

people. In other words, this could be said to be a study of the years that led to Bolsonaro's momentum, which came unexpectedly to many observers. This is one of the aspects that makes this book so valuable: It allows the reader to better understand some of the conditions that made the U-turn in Brazilian politics from the impeachment of the Workers' Party's president in 2016 to the popular support of a presidential candidate from the radical right possible.

Smith sets the scene in the introduction of the book with the hostile protesters and passionate supporters to the talk of the internationally known feminist philosopher Judith Butler at an art institute in São Paulo in November 2017. This scene serves as an introduction to the religious-secular divide that is a fundamental aspect to Brazilian politics but not least as an illustration of Smith's hypothesis of a "culture war" in Brazil driven by religious activists. Through this core idea of the book Smith advances the scholarly debate in a field where researchers have been hesitant to explain the intersection of religion and politics in Latin America with connotations to the US case. Smith mentions Daniel Stoll's warning against adopting the widespread "conspiracy view" (28) from the cold war that Evangelical churches were funded and ideologically governed by the Christian Right in the United States – a warning that for understandable reasons has influenced scholarship on Evangelicals politics in the region. Nevertheless, Smith argues convincingly for the existence of a locally conditioned and produced culture war fueled by Brazilian religious actors and not as an imported phenomenon and result of political dynamics taking place in the US. She emphasizes the striking difference between the strong correlation between religion and partisanship in the US and the weak, and nearly absent, correlation between the two in Brazil.

This leads the political scientist to search for the roots of the observable culture war in Brazil elsewhere. The result is a "clergy-centered approach" (5) which gives rise to one of the most interesting findings in the book:

Pastors, priests and religious leaders express more confidence in the Brazilian democracy than their congregants. In other words, the idea that religious leaders that polarize Brazilian politics with rigid views on gender and sexuality undermine liberal democracy from within cannot be sustained with Smith's data. Moreover, through religious activism these leaders mobilize voters to take part in political discussions and manifestations. And in that way, the clergy and congregants of these religious communities contribute to democracy. As Smith intriguingly concludes, "Brazil's clergy-driven culture wars could ultimately help to stabilize democracy" (175).

Therefore, the book leans itself on a strong focus on one of the three groups of agents that Smith postulates as driving the culture war. While the author brings together illuminating data about religiously informed political attitudes as found in interviews of congregants and the clergy, there is no comparable data on the politicians that are elected and supported by these congregants and their leaders. One would expect that a more extensive study of the religious politicians would have been fruitful, also for comparative purposes and for gaining a deeper understanding of their relationships to the congregants and the clergy who are so thoroughly explored in Smith's unique study.

It is interesting to note how deep into theological matters a study of religion and politics in Brazil this study steeps, considering that it is written in the discipline of political science. The weighing of the influence of theological ideas

versus material conditions on the choices and actions of the clergy is a persistent challenge for this type of scholarship. Smith handles this problem admirably nuanced; in laying out how the multiple objectives of the clergy are being negotiated in the choices they make (36–39).

On a conceptual level a scholar of religion could miss an argument for the problematic differentiation that is made in the book between "Pentecostal" and "Evangelical", given the processes of Pentecostalization the author mentions (34) and the diversity of Brazilian Protestantism, including in its Pentecostal variants. That said, this question of the aptness of categories on Brazilian Christianities does not defy the overall impression of an impressive work, with invaluable quantitative as well as qualitative data, about religious influence on policies with national, regional and global consequences.

Competing Interests

Smith is a partner on the research project application "The political theologies of Brazil's shifting religious landscapes and their effects on environmental attitudes and local politics (TheoBraz)", submitted by the author to the Norwegian Research Council in February 2021.

Reference

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