

## **Book Reviews**

Benjamin A. Cowan, *Moral Majorities Across the Americas: Brazil, the United States, and the Creation of the Religious Right*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. Photographs, 304 pp.; hardcover \$46.82, ebook \$24.99.

Benjamin A. Cowan's new book comes at a critical moment in Brazilian history. The recent 2022 presidential election in Brasília, won by Lula da Silva in a narrow margin against far-right, then-incumbent Jair Bolsonaro, demonstrated as it did in 2018 the political influence of right-wing evangelicals in the country's ideological thinking. According to official state prognostics, the Protestant population is expected to surpass the number of Catholics in Brazil by 2030. Therefore, to understand Brazilian politics and trace the origins of this social phenomenon, addressing Cowan's question is crucial: "how did we get here?" (6)

Based on multiple public and ecclesiastical archives, *Moral Majorities Across the Americas* covers the late 1950s and 1960s, followed by the years of the Brazilian military regime (1964-1985), the transnational links of Catholic and Protestant groups in Brazil, and the collaboration between governmental agents and religious leaders in the suppression of leftists inside and outside

ecclesiastical organizations. The book explores the origins of the Brazilian Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP), one of the key groups that advocated for the military coup in 1964 against Brazil's sitting President João Goulart, founded by historian Plínio Correa de Oliveira and Catholic traditionalists such as Bishops Geraldo Sigaud and Antônio Mayers. Beyond the activism of clergy members from the Church of Rome, these ideological initiatives also took place amid evangelical leaders like Israel Gueiros and Claudionor Andrade. Both Christian branches shared a "common platform of grievances" (19) and pursued multiple "anti" sentiments: anti-communism, anti-statism, anti-secularism, and anti-modernism. By grouping these elements, Cowan describes the central values that culminated in the ideology of the contemporary Christian right wing.

The first chapter explores how Catholics defended religious traditionalism and pushed back against the efforts of the Second Vatican Council, which aimed to call attention to poverty around the globe and worked to suppress the followers of the Liberation Theology through the use of military rule and state diplomatic structure. Chapters 2 and 3 cover the emergence of the evangelical movement and its internal tension between progressive and conservative branches. While the latter reached a prominent lobbying role at the country's

Constitutional Assembly of 1987, the former (along with Catholic progressive groups) struggled to reach prominence due to the moral alliance established between conservative religious agents (evangelicals and Catholics) and the military rule surveillance representatives. Chapter 4 has a transnational approach as it highlights the international connections of Brazilian Christian conservatives and their consumption of content and ideas from American evangelists, such as Oral Roberts and Jimmy Swaggart (p. 75). Cowan also mentions the establishment of the Confederation of Fundamentalist Evangelical Churches of Brazil (CIEF) in 1959. Backed by U.S. missionaries, this organization was dedicated to the defense of “biblical and historical Christianity” against “all the forms of theological and moral apostasy” (133). Cowan’s work also describes the participation of Brazilian protestant conservative preachers in international conferences, including the International Policy Forum, which aimed to promote “traditional family moral values” and “free enterprise” and their engagements with the International Council of Christian Churches. The fifth chapter, the book’s conclusion, reflects on the common principles that congregated global religious forces and stressed how Brazil’s government apparatus supported the rise of Christian conservative values and groups, such as governmental support for media licensing favoring right-wing preachers.

*Moral Majorities Across the Americas* is a crucial work to understand the roots of today’s Brazil and the global connections between current Brazilian conservative preachers and their counterparts in the United States amid the ongoing political influence of former Presidents Bolsonaro and Donald Trump. This book was written for an audience already familiar with the history of the Brazilian military regime, as its chapters have thematic focuses and lack historical contexts to connect some of the information the author presents. Furthermore, the comparisons to the United States’s context to assist readers in understanding the Brazilian case demonstrate that the book targets U.S.-based scholars. The relevance of Cowan’s themes demands a Portuguese translation of his work. For decades, academic analysis concerning the role and emergence of conservative religious activists was ignored and, therefore, not adequately investigated or understood. That could explain the surprise of members of academia and media when Bolsonaro reached - despite the prognostics of traditional and well-known polling institutes - a substantial number of votes that allowed him to push the 2022 presidential election to a runoff against Lula da Silva. Cowan is right when he pushes scholarship to reconsider its neglect of studying and historicizing right-wing actors and movements - a neglect that, as the author quotes Gilberto Calil, “leads to the false conclusion that

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the Right is fragile, poorly organized,  
and merely reactive” (233).

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