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Losing Their Religion?

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As Brazil booms Catholicism loses ground

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by *Marcelo Côrtes Neri*

Back in August, during the World Youth Day gathering in Madrid, Pope Benedict XVI had an important message for faith in changing times. The 2013 edition of the Roman Catholic world's biggest pilgrimage, he announced, would be held in Rio de Janeiro. Little surprise there. Brazil not only is home to Rome's largest flock but also the only Catholic BRIC. Its economy is on track to overtake France's, the Old World's Catholic powerhouse.

What would Max Weber say? The German sociologist and herald of the Protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism might find intellectual satisfaction in the current economic turmoil racking the world, starting with Europe. After all, the weakest link among the EU's 27 member states is precisely Catholic Europe: Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain, or PIIGS, in the global acronym. And with financial speculators taking aim at France, you might be forgiven for wondering if Catholic capitalism's days were numbered.



photo Ricardo Azoury

So what about Brazil? Is Rome's hold also slipping in this emerging market

democracy? How is faith faring in a land where religious orders from Candomblé to storefront Pentecostalism vie for tithes and souls? Brazilian Catholicism has weathered a slow but steady decline since the first national census was published in 1872, when 99.72% of the free population professed to follow Rome's dictums. The southward trend accelerated during the 1980s and 90s, with the national pool of Catholics slipping 0.5 to 1 percentage points per year - from 89% of the population in 1980 to 83,3% in 1991, and finally to 73.89% in 2000, when the last complete survey was conducted.

The national census carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, or IBGE, is the main data bank for research statistics on religion, but the Institute's complete 2010 census data are not yet available. Still, our own study at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas, which draws on the IBGE's Family Budget Survey (POF, in Portuguese), is instructive. For one, the numbers show that by 2003, Catholicism's "share" of the Brazilian population - considering all age groups - had apparently stabilized at 73.39%. At least for a moment.

Though we have no household survey data from 2003 through 2008, the numbers from the 2009 POF show Catholicism losing ground again, at the same pace as the 1990s but ten times faster than during the previous century (1872-1980). In fact, 2009 marks a landmark low in the founding Brazilian faith, when the number of self-designated Catholic's slumped to a record 68.4% of the population, or around 130 million people.

So was Weber right? Is Catholicism fated to fade as the economy booms? In Brazil, the answer is not so straightforward. Prosperity and Catholicism are not necessarily at war in Brazil. First, while the poor generally are the most avid Catholics, with 72.8% of the lower class (known as classe E) professing the faith, the Brazilian elite is close behind, with 69.1% of classes A and B packing the pews. That means that while their absolute numbers may be modest, Catholics still control serious money: R\$ 1.3 trillion (\$760 billion) or 68.7% of the country's income. Check out the FGV's data map for a complete picture of Brazilian religiosity.



photo Ricardo Azoury

The dynamic Northeast region not only boasts the country's most rapidly expanding economies but also Brazil's largest share of Catholics, who comprise 74.9% of regional population. From 2001 to 2009, income in the northeast grew by 41.8%, compared with 15.8% in the southeast, the least Catholic part of the country, (64.3% of its population). From 2001 to 2008, no Brazilian capital prospered like Teresina, where eight of ten inner city residents said they were practicing Catholic and incomes jumped 56.2%. During the same period, Fortaleza led the country in income growth in households on the urban periphery, where nearly 75 percent are Catholics.

In the recent past, economic crisis has gone in lock step with the decline in Brazil's signature religion. The "lost decades" of 1980 and 1990, blighted by hyperinflation and boom-and-bust growth, saw a sharp drop in Catholicism and a spike in the number of Pentecostal groups.

The period from 2003 and 2009 - a time when Brazil grew robustly despite two international economic crises - is noteworthy precisely because it offers a window on religious evolution during a period of national prosperity. During this time, the number of atheists and agnostics rose from 5.13% to 6.72% of the total population, while Protestant evangelical groups increased from 17.9% to 20.2%.

It's also worth noting that overall gains among Protestants were driven mainly by traditional Evangelicals, whose share of worshippers increased from 5.39% to 7.47%, while the more recently established Pentecostal congregations remained relatively stable at 12.7%. Followers of Afro-Brazilian and oriental religions, plus those who follow spiritualist orders, also saw their flock grow from 3.2% to 4.6%. So Brazil's boom in faith also has brought a higher degree of religious diversity.

The melting pot of Brazilian beliefs tends to dilute Catholicism. Ever since humankind started to kneel and pray, women have been more religious than men, and Brazil is no exception. Just 5% of Brazilian women profess no faith at all while 8.52% of men are doubters. And yet, fewer Brazilian women (71.3%) call themselves Catholics than do men (75.3%). Unlike men, who abandon religion more readily, women sooner switch faiths. Catholicism is a patriarchal order, while religiousness has a female face, and so it has been for centuries, as traditions pass from mothers to sons and daughters.

Brazil may not be turning Protestant, as so many have warned, or even be in danger of losing faith. But clearly today's youth are less Catholic than their parents, and if the trend holds, their children will be, as well.

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