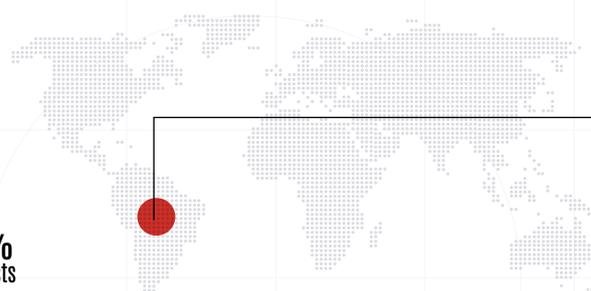
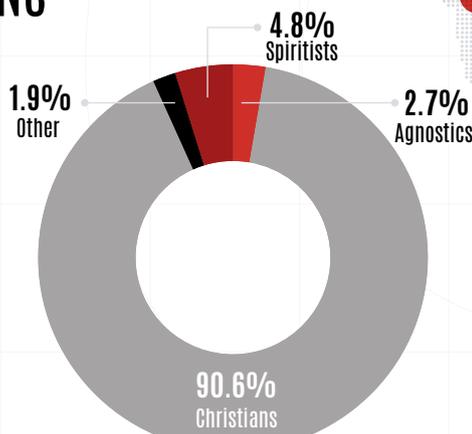




# BRAZIL

## RELIGIONS



## LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Freedom of belief and worship is guaranteed by the 1988 Brazilian constitution,<sup>1</sup> in Articles 5 (VI) and 19 (I). Law No. 7716 of 1989 criminalises discrimination based on race, colour, ethnicity, religion or nationality.

Historically, public policies aimed at combating discrimination began with racial issues, followed by gender and, more recently, religious issues.

Although these might differ from other sources, for anything related to religion the government of Brazil bases its policies on the 2010 official census. Percentage-wise they consider the religious demography of the population to be: Christians 88.83 percent, unaffiliated 7.65 percent, spiritualists/animists 2.05 percent, atheists and agnostics 0.39 percent and others at 1.08 percent.<sup>2</sup>

In 1989, a federal department, the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights, was created to implement public policies against all types of discrimination. In 2015, a new branch, the Religious Diversity and Human Rights Advisory Agency (Assessoria de Diversidade Religiosa e Direitos Humanos, ASDIR), was set

up within this Ministry specifically dedicated to tackling religious discrimination.

However, with the financial crisis that affected the Brazilian public sector in the last decade, both the federal and state governments reduced their activities in this field, closing down bodies specifically dedicated to the defence of religious diversity. As a result, the aforementioned ASDIR was shut down. In its place, the Coordination of Freedom of Religion or Belief, Conscience, Expression and Academic Research (Coordenação de Liberdade de Religião ou Crença, Consciência, Expressão e Acadêmica, COLIB) was created in 2019 under incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro.<sup>3</sup>

At present, the concept of a secular state and the separation of politics from religion are the source of an escalating conflict in Brazil. In the 2019 election, then candidate Bolsonaro undertook a campaign that politicised religious matters, as he tried to present himself as a defender of Evangelical values and communities, in particular neo-Pentecostals, in opposition to political groups considered left-wing progressives.

In addition, Evangelical Churches linked to large political interest groups have supported for a long time three political factions (informally known as bancadas, literal-

ly benches) that form the BBB caucus in the country's federal Congress, which represent the gun (bala or bullet), farm (boi or beef) and Evangelical (Bíblia or Bible) lobbies.<sup>4</sup> Evangelical preachers have also become increasingly active in political campaigns.

This situation has sparked protests and recently, federal Supreme Court Justice Luiz Edson Fachin suggested that candidates to elected office, when linked to religious groups, could become ineligible for "abuse of religious power" if they use religious venues or events for their campaigns. This proposal, however, was later rejected by the Supreme Electoral Court<sup>5</sup>

## INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

This politicisation of religious issues seems to be a characteristic of Brazil's current polarised socio-political context. Studies based on police data in the State of São Paulo have shown that crimes related to religious intolerance increased by 171 percent during the 2018 presidential election, compared to the same period the previous year.<sup>6</sup> The problem in São Paulo continued during the first half of 2019.<sup>7</sup> In the State of Rio de Janeiro, 200 cases were registered as of September 2019, while only 92 were recorded in the whole of 2018.<sup>8</sup>

However, data for the 2011-2018 period from Disque 100 (Dial 100), Brazil's free telephone service to report rights violations and domestic violence, did not show significant differences in the 2018 electoral period in relation to previous years. Complaints by telephone about religious intolerance have varied widely over the years in each Brazilian state, with no patterns like those found in police reports in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Any variation over the years reflects mainly levels of awareness, which depend heavily on promotional campaigns.

For the 2017-2018 period, Disque 100 shows a stable distribution of complaints among Brazilian states. Rio de Janeiro had the highest number of complaints per inhabitant, around four times the national average, followed by the Federal District, and Bahia, both around twice the national average. There is no explanation for these variations, which seem to be associated with social, cultural, and historical conditions not linked to religion.

All data and studies indicate that the followers of Afro-Brazilian religious rites suffer the most from religious intolerance in Brazil. The number of members of these religions is currently very small (less than 0.5 percent of the total population), but the likelihood of one of them experiencing acts of religious discrimination is 130 to 210 times greater than the general population.<sup>9</sup>

The most common incidents are attacks on places of worship as well as physical or verbal attacks on people, generally by neighbours. In addition, reports of attacks on "terreiros" (literally backyards), Afro-Brazilian temples, by criminal groups have become more frequent. Emblematic cases have been reported in Baixada Fluminense, a region in the State of Rio de Janeiro, where an Evangelical criminal gang, the self-titled "Bandits of Christ" (Bandidos de Cristo), whose chief was called "Pastor", prohibited terreiros from holding religious services.<sup>10</sup>

Such criminals intimidate the "fathers or mothers of saints" (pais de santo and mães de santo, i.e. Afro-Brazilian priests and priestesses) and threaten to destroy the terreiros if religious activities are not stopped. In this region, the same type of attack also occurs against other new esoteric religions, such as Wicca.<sup>11</sup>

After 15 terreiros were forced to close in the region in May 2019 alone, the Public Prosecutor's Office called on the state government to take urgent action.<sup>12</sup> Some of the criminals were arrested, but only months later, in August 2019.<sup>13</sup>

Acts of omission, collusion or even religious intolerance by public agencies have been growing as well. In the State of Amazonas, the Public Prosecutor's Office received a complaint that the police refused to file a case about the attempted murder of a "father of saint" by a Neo-Pentecostal neighbour.<sup>14</sup>

In a particularly serious incident, the authorities of the Federal District carried out the destruction of a terreiro, claiming that the structure was an unauthorised construction. In their defence, the management of the terreiro said that they had not been informed, adding that surrounding buildings were also unauthorised but they were not demolished. For the Brazil Bar Association (Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil), this was a case of religious intolerance.<sup>15</sup>

Longitudinal data about complaints via Disque 100 are also influenced by national and international events that

arouse hostility towards a given religion. For example, in previous years, when the persecution of Christians by the Islamic State was in the headlines, there were more cases of attacks on Muslims.<sup>16</sup>

At present, attacks on sacred sites and threats to stop religious practices of other religions seem to be more frequent in Brazil. In the interior of the country, indigenous communities have seen a rise in attacks against their religious leaders and their places of worship (torn down or set on fire).<sup>17</sup> Conflicts, in these cases, are usually associated with land disputes between indigenous peoples and landowners.

In recent years, several attacks on Catholic churches have also been reported, a rare occurrence in the past.<sup>18</sup> The attacks are usually acts of vandalism, such as the destruction of sacred images (like Our Lady of Aparecida), and graffiti on external walls. According to some analysts, there has been an increase in the persecution of Catholics, as they are accused of worshipping saints, by neo-Pentecostal Protestants.<sup>19</sup> Against a background of political polarisation, Catholic priests considered “progressive” for supporting leftist or LGBT+ issues and people have been harassed for “betraying their faith”.<sup>20</sup>

On Christmas Eve 2019, the offices of Porta dos Fundos (Back Door), a YouTube comedy channel, were attacked with Molotov cocktails.<sup>21</sup> Every year, the company produces a satirical film about Jesus and the Apostles; its 2019 parody was aired on streaming service Netflix, as a Christmas special. There were no victims and the only suspect was identified as a militant with fascist groups. He was eventually arrested in Russia, where he was on the run.<sup>22</sup>

In most of these incidents, no matter what religion is attacked, the perpetrators of the attacks tend to be Neo-Pentecostal Evangelicals. However, Evangelical communities too have been victims of attacks.<sup>23</sup>

For Brazil’s Jewish community, there is no anti-Jewish persecution in the country<sup>24</sup> and cases of intolerance or persecution are generally treated as racial, not religious in nature. Although rare in Brazil, in one incident in February 2020, a Jewish man wearing a kippah on his way to the synagogue, was beaten by young neo-Nazis.<sup>25</sup> Like in the case of followers of Afro-Brazilian religions, this might appear as religious intolerance, but for Brazilian authorities this was a case of racial

persecution.

Some Brazilian Jews have complained that Neo-Pentecostal Churches have appropriated their religious symbols. The seat of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, the largest Evangelical denomination in Brazil, is called the “Temple of Solomon” and reproduces the forms of the Old Testament building.<sup>26</sup> Some Neo-Pentecostal pastors have baptised rich or well-known believers in the Jordan River. President Jair Bolsonaro, for example, was baptised by a pastor currently serving time in prison for corruption and money laundering.<sup>27</sup> The Brazilian Jewish Confederation (Confederação Israelita do Brasil, CONIB) says it is flattered by these expressions of appreciation and believe this gives them some protection from attacks, but Orthodox Jews consider it as a misuse of Jewish tradition.<sup>28</sup>

In view of the situation, Brazil’s current federal government has undertaken certain initiatives to combat intolerance and guarantee religious freedom, through the newly created Coordination of Freedom of Religion or Belief, Consciousness, Expression and Academic Research (Coordenação de Liberdade de Religião ou Crença, Consciência, Expressão e Acadêmica, COLIB). Two booklets were prepared on the subject. The first, Religious freedom: A Guide to Your Rights,<sup>29</sup> is a general document on the subject, aimed at the entire population. The second, Protocol for religious and civil society organisations on care and reception for the homeless in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>30</sup> is specifically aimed at social organisations, many of them religious, which serve the homeless, so that they can guarantee religious freedom in serving these groups during the pandemic period.

A National Day to Combat Religious Intolerance was instituted on 21st January, involving federal, state, and local governments as well as social organisations.<sup>31</sup> In addition, states and municipalities have their own agencies and social associations dedicated to the problem. The State of São Paulo, for example, has the Inter-Religious Forum for a Culture of Peace and Freedom of Belief, with representation from 22 religious groups.<sup>32</sup>

Brazilian courts tend to rule in favour of employees when they claim to have been discriminated on religious grounds. In 2018, a large bank was found guilty because an Afro-Brazilian employee was verbally attacked by a colleague during union business.<sup>33</sup>

Although Neo-Pentecostal Evangelicals are seen as the main perpetrators of acts of intolerance in Brazil, some have come out in support of victims of aggressions. In Rio de Janeiro, the state with the highest number of such incidents, the president of the state's National Council of Christian Churches (Conselho Nacional de Igrejas Cristãs, Conic-Rio), organised a fundraising campaign for the reconstruction of a terreiro destroyed by Neo-Pentecostals.<sup>34</sup>

## PROSPECTS FOR FREEDOM OF RELIGION

Like in previous reports, followers of Afro-Brazilian religions remain the most persecuted group in the country, followed by members of esoteric and animistic religions, but overall these groups represent a small proportion of the country's population. By and large, they tend to be the victims of followers of Neo-Pentecostal Evangelical Churches.

A big change has occurred in recent history, namely the politicisation of religion and its impact on Brazilian society. Christians deemed conservatives (a fraction of both the Catholic and Evangelical communities) now have access to office and its holders in both state and federal governments, and many of their actions appear to be backed or covered up by public agencies. Secularist (Laicist) militants, in turn, have become more aggressive in public in their opposition to the ideas of these Christian groups.

The issue of Christophobia (or pejoratively called cren-tephobia in Portuguese, i.e. believer-o-phobia) is a major controversy in Brazil's contemporary public life. In a speech to the United Nations, President Bolsonaro spoke about Christophobia but was promptly criticised by experts on religious freedom.<sup>35</sup> Those who believe that Christophobia is a real problem in Brazil refer mainly to symbolic attacks, such as the aforementioned Christmas television programme that ridicules Christ and the Apostles.<sup>36</sup>

Some authors see cren-tephobia as a form of cultural repression and as an attack against freedom of expression and the values of the conservative Christian community.<sup>37</sup> The view is not unanimous,<sup>38</sup> but it fits in with the practice of "cancel culture", and this leads to social and political conflicts, based on religious arguments.

Some authors without religious affiliation have empha-

sised the need for dialogue and understanding with the conservative Christian community in order to avoid the upsurge of religiously motivated social conflicts in Brazil.<sup>39</sup>

Since the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution and new rights legislation, attacks and hate speech against non-Christian religions, especially Afro-Brazilian groups, have been reduced. Nevertheless, religious intolerance and aggression have grown recently in the country.

The politicisation of traditional values and religious beliefs have given rise to resentment among conservative Christian communities, mostly low-income Brazilians, in the face of "cancel culture". As a result, the attitudes of these Christians are becoming more violent; likewise, secular groups are also showing more disrespect and intolerance.<sup>40</sup>

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