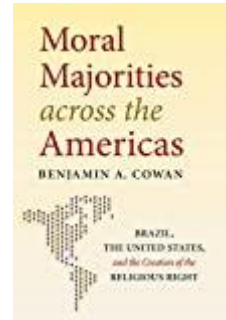


Benjamin A. Cowan. *Moral Majorities across the Americas: Brazil, the United States, and the Creation of the Religious Right.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 304 pp. \$24.99, e-book, ISBN 978-1-4696-6208-4.



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Benjamin A. Cowan seeks to correct what he sees as “academic neglect of studying and historicizing right-wing actors and movements,” such as those of the Brazilian and transnational religious Right (p. 233). To do this, he examines the development of the religious Right in Brazil primarily shortly before, during, and immediately after the military regime of 1964–85, including its interactions with the US religious Right during this period. US reverend Jerry Falwell’s religious Right organization, the Moral Majority, provides the title for the book. The word “majorities” in the book title refers to the variety of religious right-wing organizations and people in Brazil and elsewhere in the Americas, not to demographic majorities.

Cowan begins by presenting the development of the traditionalist, conservative, Brazilian Catholic view, especially in response to Vatican II (the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, held from 1962 through 1965). Brazilian traditionalists, such as Dom José Maurício da Rocha, the bishop of Bragança, considered the reforms approved by the council to weaken the church. *Fratres in Unum*

(*Brothers in One*), a right-wing group, approvingly considered Rocha to be a “monarchist, fiercely antimodernist, anticommunist, and antiliberal” (p. 16). He and other like-minded bishops were not as well known in the United States as the progressive Archbishop Dom Héder Câmara, but they inspired laymen in Brazil like Plínio Corrêa de Oliveira to found the group Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP). Together, they resisted the Christian-Marxist dialogue, liberation theology, and the secularization of society and even—in their view—the church as a result of Vatican II. They sought instead to maintain a sense of enchantment and mystery, the everyday presence of the supernatural, priestly celibacy, the Tridentine Mass, and the traditional liturgy. Many in the Brazilian Catholic Right (perhaps most visibly TFP members, who wore robes and carried elaborate banners during outdoor pageants) found instruction in the sense of transcendent wonder expressed during the European medieval period. Along with their religious and social views, they also often advocated private property, economic neoliberalism, and the

hierarchy of authority and organic inequality. They denounced rationalism, equality, anti-Catholic naturalism, and materialism. They supported what Cowan calls the moralism of the traditional role of women in marriage and childrearing, and opposed scant clothing in public, pornography, birth control, abortion, and the practice of homosexuality.

The book details the mutual support of Brazilian religious traditionalists (including Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical) and the Brazilian military government, which held power from 1964 to 1985. Cowan draws on documents from the Air Force Intelligence Center (CISA) and the Ministry of Justice (DSI/MJ), showing recognition and support for the conservatives, and vice versa. For example, a Baptist federal deputy, Arnold de Oliveira, supported government censorship as a way to achieve what he called “liberty without anarchy” (p. 82). Conservatives received tax advantages and other benefits from the government for their media outlets. They brought to the attention of government security agencies, such as at the Porto Alegre headquarters of the National Intelligence Service (SNI), the perceived dangers of progressive, anti-military religious groups. They claimed that the World Council of Churches (WCC) was a front for the Socialist International. They alleged that the WWC was fostering national liberation movements in Angola and Mozambique and worked to undermine the Brazilian military government.

One example of the public association of the regime and conservatives was a standing room only prayer meeting in 1982 at the Maracanã, a stadium in Rio de Janeiro that holds up to 150,000 people. The event, headed by Evangelical pastor Nelson Fanini, a 1958 graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, also included Brazilian president João Figueiredo as a speaker. Cowan identifies the event as important because it is an indicator of the level of popular and state support for the religious Right.

In the archives, Cowan identifies internal SNI reports, which noted the activities by TFP and other conservative groups. The Ministry of Education and Culture gave subsidies to the conservative anti-communist magazine, *Permanência*, whose editor was a vociferous critic of Vatican II. Cowan concludes that religious conservatives “could not have enjoyed fuller support from Brazilian government authorities” (p. 163).

Cowan also discusses how conservatives remained active in the transition to democracy after 1985. He notes the appearance of President José Sarney, who as vice president became president after the elected Tancredo Neves died, at a Brazilian Baptist convention. “In fact, the horse-trading, back scratching comfort between evangelicals and the government intensified during the Sarney administration and the drafting of the new constitution” (p. 93). For example, thirty-four Evangelical delegates served at the 1988 national constitutional convention (p. 74). Cowan mentions Sarney’s “unelected status” but not that he had been elected as the vice president and constitutionally became president upon Neves’s death (p. 93).

Cowan examines how a variety of conservative Catholics and Protestant or Evangelical denominations and publishers came to value their shared conservative agenda in spite of centuries of mutual suspicions and animosity since the Reformation, and how all of them developed a mutually supportive relationship with the military regime. Many conservative Catholic and Protestant Evangelicals found that they had more in common with each other than with the progressives in their own churches. Both sets of Brazilian conservatives sought association with foreign religious conservatives, such as American Evangelicals Jimmy Swaggart, Pat Robertson, Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, and Billy Graham, as well as the French Catholic archbishop Marcel Lefebvre. While conservatives opposed progressive ecumenism, international and interdenominational conservative cooperation against common cultural

enemies was found to be valuable. For example, the American Paul Weyrich, who founded the International Policy Forum (IPF), was active in Brazil with such groups as the TFP and others in Latin America. While he was a traditional Catholic, he was a supporter of conservative Evangelicals in their common objective of battling leftists. His goal was to form an organized transnational religious Right. To his religious and “God-given traditional family” moral values were added neoliberal economic ones of limited government, limited taxation, and free enterprise. Similarly, TFP established a relationship with Italy’s Alleanza Cattolica, which sought to combat “the modern secularization process, that is, society’s estrangement from God and His law” and the World Anti-Communist League (p. 156). Regarding such outreach by the TFP, US North Carolina senator Jesse Helms said approvingly, “Europe is, spiritually, almost dead,” while South America, “in a full process of religious awakening, produces the leadership of the strongest anti-communist movements” (p. 159). Cowan finds the period that he focuses on as a precursor to the “petulant attitudes and arguments of a Jair Bolsonaro, a Donald Trump, an Alex Jones, a Movimento Brasil Livre, and other manifestations of today’s Right” (p. 225).

With the word “majorities” in the title of the book, it would have been useful to have discussed the numbers of people who were members of conservative religious groups in Brazil. The 1982 Maracanã indicates widespread participation at that time, but 150,000 people at that rally in a country of 126,000,000 still leaves the reader wondering how widespread religious conservatism was.

Cowan seems to want to assure the reader that while he is studying the religious Right, he is not a supporter of it. He does not write that the Right resists the agenda of their opponents, but that the Right is in a moral panic about it. The Right is not inspired by medieval religion but yearns for a vague, mythic past. The Right’s eco-

nomic views come from “an unattainable fantasy born of neo-liberal delirium.... The religious Right in Brazil and the United States encompass contradictions and variegations both internal and comparative” (pp. 4, 5). Having established his stance, and returning to it from time to time throughout the book, there are enough asides that raise a question about to what degree we learn the views of the Right as they understand them.

Cowan makes a valuable contribution to the study of Brazil’s religious Right that explains its stance toward the somewhat more well-known views of liberation theology and other progressive religious views.

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