

## Article

# Hidden in Plain Sight: Dominion Theology, Spiritual Warfare, and Violence in Latin America

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**Abstract:** Historically, Protestant churches in Latin America regarded the ‘world’ as a realm of sin and impurity. The proper focus of the church, they believed, was on salvation, and building a community of the saved. In recent years, this has begun to change, as evangelicals have entered the political arena in force. Many are motivated by ‘Dominion theology’, a long hidden movement that works to bring a network of conservative Christians to political power in order to affect ‘dominion’ over the earth to hasten the Kingdom of God. Although its origins are in the United States, this is a global movement, hidden in plain sight. The movement has shown strength and drawn notable political allies all across Latin America, with notable cases in Central America and Brazil. This remains a minority and a much-contested movement in Latin American Protestantism, but its advocates are working hard to gain positions of influence.

**Keywords:** evangelical; Pentecostal; Dominion theology; Rushdoony; Latin America; Guatemala

## 1. Introduction

Since the ‘evangelical boom’ that began in the 1970s, social scientists have long anticipated the emergence of Protestants, and Pentecostals in particular, as a powerful political and social force for change in Latin America. With a few exceptions, this has not been the case: Latin American Pentecostals have largely tended to frame their moral constructs in terms of ‘the church’ and the ‘world’. They have historically regarded the world outside the church as a demonic and dangerous space, with which evangélicos<sup>1</sup> should avoid all contact, except through evangelization and prayer.

However, this is rapidly changing. As evangelical religion becomes more established in Latin America, an increasing number of evangelical, mainly Pentecostal/neopentecostal, churches have adopted the hermeneutics of political engagement derived from a movement known as ‘Christian Restoration’, the international derivation of which is known as ‘Dominion theology’. Dominion theology is a type of political evangelism that works to bring a network of conservative Christians to political power in order to affect ‘dominion’ over the earth to hasten the Kingdom of God. Although there are antecedents dating back to the 1980s, it is only since the first decades of this century that the movement has become widespread across Latin America. The object of this chapter is to shed light on Dominionism and its impact in vernacular settings, given that it is one of the most influential, unrecognized, political movements in Latin America today.

### Costa Rica

On Easter Day 2018, Costa Ricans elected a new president, Carlos Alvarado, a member of the ruling party, the PCN. Unlike most Costa Rican elections, which are usually democratic, fair, predictable,

<sup>1</sup> I use the word ‘*evangélico*’ in this work as it is used in Spanish and Portuguese, to indicate any Protestant, regardless of denomination

and a little dull, the nation held its collective breath that year, due to predictions that another candidate, a Pentecostal journalist named Fabricio Alvarado Muñoz (no relation to Carlos), would win the election. Fabricio was neither a seasoned politician nor a particularly well-known figure in Costa Rica prior to around 2017. However, he and his National Restoration Party (PNR) suddenly rose to the fore in the early stages of that nation's presidential campaign, thanks to the candidate's pledge to 'restore' Costa Rica to its pro-life, anti-LGBT, anti-gay-marriage, bolstered by traditional family and Costa Rican values.

Despite the fact that Costa Rica is, in many respects, a progressive and forward-looking country, certainly by Central American standards, it is also, in the words of one pundit, 'conservative from the waist down' (Wyss 2018). A recent ruling that legalized gay marriage pushed many *ticos* into the Fabricio Alvarado camp during the first round of presidential elections in February 2018. Fabricio Alvarado ultimately lost the election, but only by a slim margin. Since then, however, Fabricio's notoriety has only increased, and his political future in Costa Rica seems assured.

The political rise and fall of Fabricio Alvarado, however, in fact, is indicative of something more than Costa Rican domestic politics. His Restoration party is part of a much larger movement across Latin America and, indeed, the world, that is hidden in plain sight to most observers, though it is clearly legible to the knowing, even boldly advertised in the party's name. This is a so-called 'Christian' movement known as Christian Restoration, along with its international derivative, Dominion theology.

In actual terms, Dominion theology is not so much a 'theology' per se so much as it is an ideology and practice for a specific type of conservative Christian political engagement derived from Christian Restorationism. Its goal is to adopt a mentality of cultural engagement to bring about political action resulting in nodes of their specific variety of Christian political leadership across all nations; in the lexicon of the movement, advocates seek to 'transform', 'redeem', and 'restore' culture, thus bringing 'dominion' to the earth and restoring Christ's Kingdom to precipitate His Second Coming. The movement is widespread, and its advocates are often politically influential, although it remains a minority current within the stream of evangelical Christianity writ large. Many outsiders, including Christian fundamentalists, and non-Dominionist Pentecostals, mainline Protestants, and Mormons, view it with deep suspicion; these groups find its ideas unbiblical, threatening, and even abhorrent. Some even refer to it as 'dark Christianity'.

Even so, Dominionist thinking is widespread in Latin America; it has been a factor in an incipient form at least since the early 1980s, when, in Guatemala, 'church growth' specialists declared the genocidal Rios Montt administration to be a 'prophetic moment' when Christians would begin to take dominion over failed secular governments (Garrard-Burnett 2010). However, it is in the past 10 years, not only in Latin America but in much of the world at large, that it has stepped out more boldly from the shadows across the region.

## 2. The Roots of Christian Restorationism and Dominion Theology

The roots of Dominion theology draw from Calvinism and an earlier fundamentalist mode known as 'Christian Restoration'. Dominion theology demanded the politization of the faith to reconstruct a Godly society from the rubble of secular liberalism. (Its early form, Christian Reconstructionism, called for an end to liberal democracy and for a new society to be built based on Old Testament law, including Mosaic-era penalties such as execution by stoning for adultery and homosexuality, and the imposition of theonomy, a government based on divine law) (North 1982; Hedges 2006). Its contemporary roots date back to 1973—not coincidentally, the same year that the United States Supreme Court legalized abortion. That year, a theologian and historian, trained at Berkeley, the University of California, by the name of Rousas John (RJ) Rushdoony published a treatise called *The Institutes of Biblical Law*. Rushdoony was a strict Calvinist and also sympathetic to the John Birch Society, a fiercely conservative political movement that coalesced in the US itself as a champion of tradition values against what it defined as the worst excesses of secular, libertine liberalism, including racial integration, secular education, women's rights, and multiculturalism (a term anachronistic to that time).

It was Rushdoony who most successfully fused this political tendency onto an evangelical framework. His *Institutes of Biblical Law*, a highly parenetic work, readily revealed its deep Calvinist roots in its commitment to the ideas of ‘election’ and ‘predestination’, and would become the foundational book of Dominionism (Rushdoony 1973). (Note: Rushdoony considered himself a Restorationist, not a Dominionist per se, but he is nonetheless the genesis figure in the latter movement). Rushdoony’s fundamental premise builds on four key principles. (1) Jesus as calling on Christians to create a society that is founded and predicated on God’s laws according to the Bible. (2) The United States is God’s chosen and elect providential agent. (3) The US cannot yet fulfill this destiny because of its sinful and fallen state, as evinced by key bellwether issues, particularly legal abortion, the prohibition of public prayer in school, the teaching of evolution, approbation of same-sex marriage and other similar rights, compounded by the multiplicity of non-Christian voices and values corrupting American society. (4) The selection of ‘true’ Christian leadership is essential to expunging and repenting for these sins. Biblical law must replace secular legal codes and Christian values should form the basis of the educational system. This leadership must restore a nostalgic ‘Christian’ *imaginaire* where (white) men, acting with Biblically sanctioned, benevolent and godly *noblesse oblige*, dictate the lives of women, people of color, and all those outside the mainstream (Hedges 2006).

Rushdoony’s work directly or derivatively inspired three interrelated religious–political movements. The umbrella term, *Christian Restoration*, refers to the notion that the Founding Fathers of the US never intended to create a truly secular nation, and it demands that today’s task is to restore the United States to a Christian nation defined by its adherence to precise Biblical standards in all central aspects of public life: law, governance, gender and race interactions, reproductive health, and education. The second is the closely related idea of *Christian nationalism*, which extrapolates these ideas into a direct-action political ideology which, in the United States, has attached itself to the Republican Party. In the worlds of analyst Michelle Goldberg, ‘It is a conflation of scripture and politics that sees America’s triumphs as part of a cosmic context between God and the Devil.’ (Goldberg 2006). This manifestation has become so politically emphatic that recent observers have referred to Republican-oriented Christian nationalism as a ‘political bloc with a religious past’ (Bruenig 2020).

The third current is *Dominion theology*, the specific topic of this chapter and the aspect most germane to Latin America. This an international, perhaps more optimistic, derivation of Christian Restorationism that is less specific to the United States, but still fiercely driven by a strident opposition to secular liberalism and demanding society’s ‘restoration’ to godly rule as proscribed by Rushdoony a generation ago. Because all of these propositions are so closely interwoven and because each bleeds onto the others, it is not always possible or even desirable to separate one from another. As Goldberg suggests, ‘It is a hydra-headed thing, sometimes contradictory but unified enough to be called by a single name.’ (Goldberg 2006). As this article is specifically concerned with Latin America, I will use term ‘Dominionism’ because of its more international, less US-oriented implications, even as I acknowledge the imprecision of the nomenclature.

Rushdoony provides a series of propositions that translate readily into a methodology. The first and most important of these is the notion that because ‘Christian’ leadership in the Dominionist mold is completely of God, all other political and societal figures are not merely in opposition, but literally Satanic and against God and His holy law. Because there can be no compromise with Satan, Dominionism eschews the traditional, liberal (in the 18th century sense) Western values that stem from the nation’s Enlightenment-era founding documents: justice, equality, tolerance, reason, compassion, respect for dissent, and the immutability of science. In this way of thinking, there is no room for dissent or difference in opinion. In this theocratic thinking, Others are demonized, literally, to the point of dehumanization. This outlook offers fertile ground for the growth of conspiracy theories and absurd, even obscene accusations against ‘enemies’, because Satan, always a trickster, can and does readily colonize the human mind and soul.

One of the markers of Dominion theology in particular is a reimagining of Jesus as a muscular, aggressive, hypermasculine figure—nothing like the meek and mild Prince of Peace—often portrayed

carrying a large sword or even an automatic weapon to lead the faithful into battle with the ungodly. (As Jerry Falwell, Sr. confidently declared in an interview with the *New Yorker* back in 1981, ‘Christ was a man with muscles’.) (Fitzgerald 1981). The imagery—which appears widely on various popular culture platforms from t-shirts to social media—is a potently martial and aggressive one, and it calls for nothing short of the destruction of the liberal, Enlightened secular state. It demands ‘spiritual warfare’, and the restoration of ‘Christian values’ by any means necessary, including through violence. Although these references ostensibly stem from the Apocalypse of the Book of Revelation, it is only a short rhetorical leap from that world to the temporal one.

Second, the movement intentionally engages with what Hedges terms ‘*logocide*’, meaning that it appropriates and re-signifies well-known words with new meanings, which become code words, shifting meaning even as outsiders and sometimes even insiders fail to note the difference. Chief among these are key words of the United States’ political idiom that have long been linked to secular, liberal democracy, such as ‘freedom’, ‘liberty’, ‘wisdom’, ‘life’, ‘love’ (Hedges 2006). ‘Wisdom’, for example, in the new religious lexicon means unquestioned commitment to the hegemony of the movement; ‘freedom’ is life in Christ in a highly proscribed definition of what this means; ‘love’ is unquestioned obedience to those to claim to speak ‘for God’s law-order’, which is itself, in Rushdoony’s words, the ‘only true liberty’ (Rushdoony 1973).

Because all these charged words are deeply familiar and resonant to most Christians of all stripes and central to the patriotic sentiments of most citizens of democratic countries, it is all too easy for compliant preachers and secular politicians to lead earnest believers down this path, especially when that trail is marked along the way by familiar pet objections to modern society, such as abortion and gun-control. (In Latin America, it bears noting, neither of these two specific concerns are hot-button political issues, but rather, moral ones. For example, only two countries in the region, Cuba and Uruguay, allow abortion without restriction, and gun control laws—usually unenforced—are stringent in most Latin American countries) (Córdova Villazón 2014; Fernandez Anderson 2013; Gacs et al. 2019). However, many Latin Americans *do* share with other conservative Christians a great discomfort with progressive social imperatives such as gay rights, feminism, and sex education in public schools, which they believe undermine the primacy of the traditional family, which is, generally speaking, the most trusted and valued social unit among people who live in the region. This is precisely the milieu in which secular political ambition and religious principles can readily meld with one another to create a single ideology supported by a powerful moral panic that feeds off code words, unquestioning obedience, and a faith-vindicated fear of the Other. This is hegemony by consent in the most Gramscian sense: in return for submitting to a closed-circuit of authority and self-referential verities, followers believe they are following God’s will and will thus receive God’s favor and eternal life.

It is important to underscore that not all, or even most evangelicals are Dominionists, and many traditional conservative evangelical leaders, have publicly expressed their strong discomfort with it (Stewart 2020). Moreover, not all Dominionists are evangelicals—conservative, fiercely anti-abortion Catholics also make up their numbers. Most importantly for this chapter, although Dominion theology has deep North American roots, preachers and politicians in Latin America have adopted it with enthusiasm, seeing in it a new opportunity to lay claim to another imported ideology (as they did in the late Cold War with anti-communism) to adapt to advance their own political and religious interests in their home countries.

### 2.1. The New Apostolic Reformation

As we have seen, Dominion theology claims that evangelical Christians are charged by God to ‘claim dominion’ over their home nations, if not the entire world. In much of Latin America, the methodology for building dominion is three-fold: followers engage first in vigorous prayer and then move on to direct political and social action. Specifically, they envision that a new Christian society will be built upon ‘seven mountains’ formed on biblical principles (Weaver 2016; Wallnau 2013). These ‘seven mountains’ are comprehensive spheres of influence: church, education, government/military,

family, business/commerce, arts/entertainment, and media. The principal goal of dominion theology and the seven-mountain mandate is the political and religious domination of the world, country by country, through the implementation of the moral laws and sanctions of the Bible, particularly of the Old Testament (Wallnau and Maiden 2011). Latin American Dominionists promise that fervent and directed intercession, coupled with careful political slating, will bring about total ‘transformation’—a term of art—that will usher in a new age of peace, prosperity, and Christian benevolence to their troubled societies, the nations, and the global community at large. If these efforts fail, however, they do not rule out other options.

Many of the agents of Dominionism are part of an evangelical, mainly Pentecostal current known as the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR). The NAR is not a denomination or even a formal network *per se*, but its ‘apostles’ are usually connected with one another either theologically or relationally. In the last years of the 20th century, a cohort of autonomous ‘rising stars’ in the movement have emerged in Latin America; these enjoy a large popular following, either through their stature as the prominent pastors of megachurches, or as televangelists (Osborn 2015).

At the heart of its theology is the notion that the source of a society’s, or a people’s ills, come from demonic forces that are present today either because of some sort of ancient Satanic pact, such as, in this case, devotion to indigenous religious practices and images, or because of an individual or an identarian group’s ‘flawed spiritual DNA’; this is especially an issue in Latin America and Africa, where indigenous religions and hybrid varieties of Christianity remain vigorous (Weaver 2016). To overcome these barriers, Christian fighters must undertake ‘spiritual warfare’, a method of prayer and action that rises above the allegorical to project the live fire of faith against evil.

Here, prayer warriors, usually a pastor and his congregation, work to expel these dark forces (‘fallen angels, principalities, dominions, and demons’) out of a locality through prayers, fasting, exorcism, and, less commonly, direct physical destruction. Once exorcised, the locality is, in the term of art, ‘transformed’ and redeemed for Christ. This approach privileges the knowledge and authority of local pastors and ‘apostles’, who are most familiar with the contours of the local spiritual landscape (Wagner 1979). The NAR did not invent spiritual warfare, and it is not unique to them, but they did help to bring it from the sidelines into standard Pentecostal repertoire.

The throughline from Dominion theology to spiritual warfare—the former being a political theology, the latter more a methodology—is that spiritual warfare *within this context* is not simply the deliverance or exorcism of an individual, but of a location and the collectivity of people who inhabit a given physical and metaphysical space. This can be a productive process which helps communities engage with a paradigm that can help them build better and more productive lives. However, it is also a hermeneutics that lends itself to a rapid slide down the slippery slope from celestial warfare against malign spirits to outright physical violence against other human beings in the here-and-now.

## 2.2. Building Dominion

It was during the 1980s, in the aftermath of the rise of the ‘Moral Majority’ and the coalition of conservative Christians that helped elect Ronald Reagan to the US presidency, when the advocacy and mobilization of conservative Christians gained unprecedented momentum. During the 1980s, the Central American crisis provided an ideal foreign testing ground for this activist theology, pinpointing Guatemala, a country that at the time was undergoing a significant boom in evangelical growth and which then laid claim to the largest Protestant population, percentage wise, in all of Latin America: Guatemala would serve as a prototype for what would eventually be known as Dominion theology (Garrard-Burnett 1998). There, a recently born-again Pentecostal general, Efraín Ríos Montt was leading his scorched-earth campaign against leftist insurgents and the dominant Maya population. At the time, proto-NRA church growth specialists predicted that Guatemala was poised on the threshold of its ‘*hora de Dios*’,—its *kairos*, its prophetic moment, and the tipping point, when prayer and large-scale conversions to Protestantism—would allow the troubled country to undergo wholesale transformation (Garrard-Burnett 2010).

Ríos Montt's overthrow in a military coup in 1983 and his eventual conviction for genocide and crimes against humanity committed by him during his tenure in office took the starch out of his reputation as a 'Christian soldier' for dominion, and compelled his conservative Christian supporters in the United States to eventually distance themselves from him. Despite this, however, in the hands of its local advocates, Dominion theology continued to take shape both as a religious praxis and as a political vision. At the helm of this new direction was Guatemala's Harold Caballeros, the founder and now the former pastor of the wealthy mega-church El Shaddai, and, not coincidentally, an early proponent and international celebrity of the NAR (O'Neill 2012).

Caballeros was an early advocate of spiritual warfare. When the excavation of the Parque Central to build a subterranean parking lot in front of the National Palace in Zone 1 of Guatemala City revealed a pre-Columbian statue of the Mesoamerican winged deity Quetzalcoatl, Caballeros identified the image as the demonic source of Guatemala's many historical woes and traumas, and He and his prayer warriors launched an all-out spiritual war of prayers for national deliverance.<sup>2</sup> Caballeros' ministry speaks directly to a precise definition of 'Christian citizenship' calls for direct engagement by neopentecostals in prayer and politics for the 'redemption' of their nations (O'Neill 2010). If one can 'name and claim' blessings for one's self, Caballeros argues, then should not the same be true for one's family, one's community, and, indeed, for the entire country, and the world beyond?

As Kevin Lewis O'Neill has demonstrated in *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Guatemala*, while Caballeros' tipping point for national, even international transformation has remained elusive, the principles of 'Christian citizenship', largely by way of small prayer and study groups affiliated with El Shaddai have become active nodes for capacity-building among Guatemalan Pentecostals. This is true not least for Pastor Harold himself, who ran for President of Guatemala in two elections. Though unsuccessful both time, his campaign for the presidency in 2011 resulted in his being named Foreign Minister in the administration of President Otto Pérez Molina, a post he later resigned from, as did the president himself a few years later.

Not all Pentecostal efforts at claiming dominion have been as peaceful as Caballeros'. Spiritual Warfare has become a common tactic and trope in much of Guatemalan Pentecostalism, and its manifestations are sometimes physical or even lethal. On the other hand, we can observe one of its salubrious manifestations in the town of Almolonga, a prosperous K'iche' Maya highland village where the vast majority of the citizens are Pentecostal. The town's citizens, whose prosperity patently challenges the stereotype that "to be 'Indian' is to be poor," credit its economic success and low crime rate to the town's near-collective conversion to Protestant Christianity in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Almolonga's 'transformation', in Dominionist parlance, was an explosive one. After Jesus Himself, in material presence, commanded a local pastor told hold a series of healing services, villagers readily took part. There, they experienced the expulsion of demons (some so violent that the exiting demons flung their victims across the room) and collectively repudiated a local Maya deity, San Simón. In return, villagers—more than 80% of whom are *evangélicos*—fervently believe that God has materially rewarded this tiny 'city of miracles' with great abundance. Dominionists have held up Almolonga as a poster child for 'transformation' to conservative evangelical churches around the world; the village even appears in a Sunday School video from the 1990s appropriately titled *Transformations*. NAR prophet and spiritual warrior Harold Caballeros, a Dominionist, features heavily in this film, much to the chagrin of local indigenous protagonists (Garrard 2020).

It is measurably true that Almolonga enjoys remarkable success, especially in relation to other indigenous towns in the region, and credit for that belongs somewhere, which Almolongueños believe

<sup>2</sup> A different version of this story recounts that the Quetzalcoatl image was discovered by workmen while breaking ground for Caballeros' new megachurch, El Shaddai, in Zone 13 of Guatemala City. The account here is the one that Caballeros recalled to me.

is the *don*—the gift—of God.<sup>3</sup> Almolonga's social statistics are indeed singularly impressive. Since its deliverance event in the mid-1970s, Almolonga's agricultural productivity (augmented not just by prayer, but also by fertilizer and new farming techniques), dramatically increased; the town is now known as 'the vegetable garden of Central America' (Falla 1972; Goldin 1987). The average local income is more than twice that of the neighboring village of Zunil, and as a result men from Almolonga can earn a living in their home town, thus saving the community from the familiar and social rupture of emigration that plagues so much of rural Guatemala. Crime rates are so low that local leaders turned the jail into a community center, which they rechristened the 'Hall of Honor' (Winger 2012). According to government data for the municipality, alcoholism, intoxication, and 'senility' (often-alcohol related), the three leading causes of death in neighboring villages, are so uncommon in Almolonga that the local government-run health center no longer even lists them as diagnostic categories (Almolonga 2005; Zunil 2005).

Despite this blessing and abundance—which is indeed extraordinary by even secular measures—this providential sense of being has from time to time taken a lethal turn over the past few years, as Almolonga's evangélicos have become enforcers of the miracle by purging the town of interlopers and purported criminals who threaten their peace and prosperity. In 1998, villagers took the law into their own hands and cruelly lynched two teenage *ladinos* (non-indigenous) brothers from the nearby city of Quetzaltenango in the mistaken belief that they had been the perpetrators in a recent series of bus robberies (Prensa Libre 1998). In 2018, an angry mob of local evangélico businessmen severely beat two suspected kidnappers and burned their vehicles; the National Civil Police (PNC) were called to prevent the suspects from being beaten to death, but the mob repelled them, claiming that the presumed criminals still had accomplices in the town. More recently, in at least one documented case (although many more are rumored to have occurred), *evangélico* vigilantes formed a *turba* (lynch mob) to attack and lynch a young man who they determined, without benefit of judicial process, to be a thief and criminal (Rivera and Toc 2018). As recently as 2020, Almolongueños have violently opposed restrictions to prevent COVID-19, protesting that faith alone was enough to protect them and that restrictions would damage local commerce (El Periódico 2020). In May 2020, a group attacked four journalists who were covering this story, right in the midst of the vast vegetable market that lies at the steps of El Calvario church, the site of Almolonga's original blessing. The journalists were roughed up, their cameras and recorders taken, and their vehicles damaged, but they escaped the town in one piece, thanks to the timely intervention of the PNC (Sandoval 2020).

Is it fair to suggest all these assaults were religiously motivated? The answer is a qualified yes, in the sense that Almolonga's local epistemology is based in the belief that its success and prosperity is grounded in its specific experience of divine blessing; these episodes are not spiritual warfare, but social cleansing, understood by local people as intervention on God's behalf to preserve His miracle. Thus, we see the slippage on the moral battlefield between spiritual struggle and plain vigilantism: the line between the two is all too porous.

Almolonga is not the only place in Guatemala where evangélicos have banded together for the social cleansing of persons they consider to be bad social actors. In 1997, the same year as the first Almolonga incident, another such *turba* gathered in San Antonio Palopó, a Kakchiquel Maya village near the lovely Lago de Atitlán, to lynch three young thieves. Two escaped, but one did not: after severely beating him, the mob doused the young man with gasoline and burned him alive. The *turba* was mostly *evangélico*, and as a group, it was the church people's level of cohesion and leadership that helped to incite the mob (Piazza 2012). A few years later, a similar incident took place in the nearby town of San Lucas Tolimán, where a largely religious *turba* also apprehended, beat, and burned a young thief alive. Elsewhere, in the Mam Mayan town of Todos Santos Cuchumatán, angry locals

<sup>3</sup> I elucidate this case much more fully in chapter 2, 'Chapter 2: Tricksters, Gods and Global Pentecostalism in Almolonga, Guatemala', *Faces of God in Latin America: Emerging Forms of Vernacular Christianity*, (Oxford University Press, 2020).

killed a local man who had recently returned from living in the US, where he had grown his hair long and pierced his ears, on the unproven premise that he was not only a *marero*, (gang member) but also ‘filled with the devil’ (Weston 2019).

Most recently, in June 2020, in the community of Chimay, San Lucas, El Petén, vigilante ‘justice’ took an especially gruesome turn. In this case, a lynch mob made up predominately of evangélicos poured gasoline on and set fire to Domingo Choc Che, a Q’eqchi’ native healer, accusing him of practicing witchcraft. They and many other bystanders next recorded Choc on their phones as he screamed and ran about wildly, the highly oxygenated flames quickly consuming him in death (Menchú 2020; Sandoval 2020). In the background of the 28-second video that his killers made—all of them his Q’eqchi’ neighbors, most of them purportedly devout Christians—not a single person moved to help Choc (TN23 2020). Some days later, a son of the man who Choc had supposedly killed by magic admitted freely to having purchased the gasoline and matches that ignited Choc, so it is not yet clear, given the exigencies of long-distant research, if the turba was motivated more by religious fervor or family vengeance. Even so, the ghastly video posted on YouTube of the murder bore these final words: ‘*Lo quemaron por brujo*’ (They burned him for being a witch (Ollantay 2020)).

It is important to underscore that by no means all, or even most, vigilantism in Guatemala stems from religious zealotry, since Guatemala has one of the highest rates of extrajudicial killings in the world. According to the national Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos, between 2005 and 2019, some 431 people were lynched, while 2366 were beaten and badly injured (U.S. Department of State 2009). Scholars and criminologists attribute this grim statistic to a very weak rule of law in much of the country, a lack of confidence in an effective and impartial judiciary, and even the tendency for indigenous people to resort to ‘customary law’ within their communities rather take their grievances to the racist and corrupt system associated with the state (Mendoza and Torres-Rivas 2003). Others blame a long-standing tendency for Guatemalans to do things ‘*en su propia manera*’—to take matters into their own hands. (Girón Sandoval 2007). However, there can be little doubt that in communities where Pentecostal rhetoric specifically demands spiritual combat—that is, direct, confrontation as collective active agents of God against the power of evil, and summons believers to act as soldiers on a clearly Manichean battlefield where Good and Evil meet—it also, however unintentionally, helps fuel violent and lethal interactions.

Guatemala is hardly unique; while this chapter briefly undertakes three short case studies, it could just as easily highlight others: Colombia, Mexico, Haiti, and Bolivia stand out, and they are by no means the only other examples. Brazil, above all, stands out from the rest. There, NAR Pentecostals were closely involved in the constitutional *coup d’état* that removed Brazil’s popularly elected leftist president, Dilma Rousseff, in 2016. The powerful *bancada evangélica* (evangelical bloc), which makes up 13% of congressional members, both then and now is one of the most influential sectors in the Brazilian national assembly (Ribeira and Lago 2019). Alongside the well-known Pentecostal leader and speaker of the House of Deputies, Eduardo Cunha, these were active agents in the constitutional coup against Dilma Rouseff (Encarnación 2017).

Conservative evangélico support contributed to the rapid political rise and election of far-right former military-officer-turned-born-again ‘Christian’ named Jair Messias Bolsonaro to the presidency of Brazil (Polimédio 2018; Nogueira 2018). Bolsonaro won the Brazilian presidential elections on 28 October 2018, with a hefty margin and very wide support from Brazil’s evangelicals, who now make up nearly a quarter of Brazil’s overall population. Bolsonaro, who many aptly refer to as the ‘Brazilian Trump’, is outspoken, bombastic, and authoritarian (The Economist 2017). His ferociously anti-immigrant views, his gloves-off law-and-order mentality, outrageously misogynistic and homophobic statements, his disdain for Brazil’s enormous non-White population, enthusiasm for combating his political enemies through violence and even assassination, and his flagrant disregard for democracy, do not, on their face, suggest much in the way of a Christian outlook (Biller and Douglas 2017).

Bolsonaro is outspoken and vulgar. He openly pushes ferociously anti-immigrant and racist views. His law-and-order mentality is notorious; he famously opined back in 1999, that Brazil’s military

government of the 1960s and 1970s ‘should have killed 30,000 people, starting with Congress as well as [former president and economist] Fernando Enrique Cardozo’, and he attempted to create a new holiday to commemorate the great successes of that murderous regime (Finchelstein 2018). Under Bolsonaro’s inattentive leadership, the COVID-19 epidemic, as in the United States, has run rampant; at the same time, Bolsonaro, a climate change denier, allowed massive wildfires in the Amazon, many caused by new settlers and exploiters that the government had encouraged to ‘develop’ the region to burn freely, even as he did his best to deny their reality (Spring and Marcello 2020). He has placed the autonomy and the authority of the Brazilian Congress under direct attack (Phillips 2020). His government has increased repression of ‘terrorists’ such as social justice and dissident groups, particularly Black activists (Soares 2020). He has also issued regular denunciations and attempted to reduce the rights and property of *quilombolas*, the descendants of runaway slaves who live in remote, communities (*quilombos*) that were granted legal recognition and collective land ownership by the 1988 Brazilian constitution, and which have fought hard to maintain their land rights and cultural autonomy (Braga de Souza 2019).

Despite Bolsonaro’s enthusiastic misanthropy and racism, his strong anti-corruption stance, coupled with his profoundly conservative views on gender and sexuality, make him a popular populist figure among conservative Brazilians, even those well outside the Dominionist Pentecostal community (Venaglia 2018). Conservative evangelicals appreciate his opposition to abortion, the legalization of drugs, his opposition to LGBT causes, his distaste for affirmative action quotas for Blacks, and his eagerness to stand up for nationalistic and white identarian politics (Alves Leal 2018). Despite his provocative pronouncements that run directly contrary to Christ’s teachings on fundamental issues, Bolsonaro has won the favor of Brazil’s most prominent and influential evangelical leaders, although mainline Christians remain repelled by his incendiary and tendentious speech and policies (Pereira 2018). As Brazilian commentator Gilberto Alves Leal notes, for many evangelicals, who are accustomed to submitting themselves fully to the mandates of an ‘anointed’ spiritual leader, “the authoritarian posture of Bolsonaro does not provoke fear, but rather a ‘familiar sense of security’.” (Alves Leal 2018).

During the presidential campaign, Bolsonaro won endorsements from key evangelical leaders and NAR apostles, including Silas Malafaia, and Jose Wellington Berreza, the head superintendent and president, respectively, of Brazil’s single largest Pentecostal denomination, the Assembleia de Deus (Frazão 2018). No less a figure than the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus’ founder and influential ‘Bishop’, Edir Macedo, offered his powerful endorsement of Bolsonaro during the campaign. Today, Macedo is one of the president’s most powerful and influential supporters (Veja 2018).

On 1 September 2019, Macedo formally presented Bolsonaro to God and to his vast congregation at the IURD’s showcase Templo de Salomão in São Paulo. The pastor of one of the world’s largest megachurches offered his blessing on the president, declaring him to be ‘*consegado*’, (consecrated) ‘*profético*’ (prophetic), and a leader ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’. On this occasion, the diminutive Macedo placed his hands on the kneeling Bolsonaro so as to anoint his head with holy oil, ordering him to ‘lead the beloved country in the name of Jesus’ (Chapola et al. 2018). Macedo, who is a leading NAR ‘prophet’ and an ardent Dominionist, marked Bolsonaro as one divinely chosen to shepherd the Americas’ largest nation to ‘apostolic governance’, which will, in turn, lead to the transformation of Brazil and far beyond (Macedo 2019).

With such an ‘anointed’ leader in power and within an environment that increasingly condones division and intolerance, it is perhaps not surprising that some of Brazil’s Pentecostals have also translated their warfare from the spiritual realm to the streets (CartaCapital 2018). In fact, there had been a noticeable upswing in violence related to religious intolerance prior to Bolsonaro’s rise, since around 2016, but in 2019, the Rio-based Comissão de Combate à Intolerância Religiosa recorded a 56% increase in religious violence in that single year (Duarte de Souza 2020). The majority—although not all, since some charismatic Catholic groups have also been accused of such actions—of these events consist of assaults by Pentecostals, often specifically the members of Macedo’s denomination,

the IURD, against practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions, particularly Candomblé, Umbanda and the ‘*matriz africana*’—the breadth of African-based faiths—more generally. These attacks are not rogue, but entirely intentional. In his widely-read book *Orixás, Caboclos e Guias, deuses ou demônios?*, the IURD’s Edir Macedo admonished his followers that African religious expressions ‘seek to keep us from God. They are enemies of Him and the human race’. He added: ‘This struggle with Satan is necessary . . . to eternal salvation.’<sup>4</sup> (Macedo 1980).

The Brazilian federal court banned the book in 2005, on the grounds that it was ‘degrading, insulting, prejudiced and discriminatory’ (*degradante, injuriosa, preconceituosa e discriminatória*) to Afro-Brazilian religions, and as such a danger to society, but Macedo continues to make the work available to members of his church (Tinoco 2019). In recent years, attacks on Umbanda and Candomblé templos and terreiros have increased dramatically, spiking sharply since Bolsonaro’s assumption of the presidency. By way of example, in 2019, several hundred such attacks—more than one third of those that occurred in the entire country—took place in the Baixada Fluminense, one Rio’s poorest and therefore most crime-ridden neighborhoods, an area that is home to more than 250 terreiros (these conflated fluidly with Bolsonaro’s war on urban crime by any means, including violence). Violent attacks by Pentecostals and neopentecostals (not only from the IURD, but also from the Assembleias de Deus and other Pentecostals with deep roots in Brazil) against the *matriz africana* have become so common that the assailants have earned the sobriquet of ‘*gospeltraficantes*’, an obvious play on the Portuguese word for ‘narcotraffickers’ (Marton 2019). They attack with impunity, working under the imprimatur and tacit approval of Bolsonaro to purge Brazil of Africa’s ‘demonic stain’ and to ‘restore’ it as a Christian nation operating under Biblical strictures and Godly law.

Although the level of violence in Brazil rarely reaches that of the Guatemalan lynchings—thus far—the attacks are acts of physical aggression packaged in religious rhetoric and imagery. They tend to consist of violent attacks on temples and *terreiros*, the destruction of religious images, physical and verbal assaults (particularly against the *matriz africana*’s religious leaders), arson, and manslaughter, since some victims have died of heart attacks after violent confrontations (Muggah 2019). The language that the Pentecostal warriors use is in the violent idiom of spiritual warfare: as one Candomblé practitioner who described the attack at her *terreiro* Ilê Omo Aiyê in São Paulo states, the assailants shouted, ‘*Senhor, protegei-nos do demônio*’ and ‘*Queima ela, queima ela, Senhor*’ (Lord, protect us from the devil! and ‘Burn her, burn her!’). These sort of confrontations have become commonplace (and unpunished) in areas of Brazil where Afro-Brazilian religions are most widely practiced, such as Natal, São Paulo, Salvador Bahia, and Rio de Janeiro (Mann 2019). They have also, increasingly, become an accepted part of the Pentecostal spiritual warfare repertoire and a hallmark of Dominionist success.

### 3. Conclusions

For several decades now, pundits and serious observers have posited ‘the politics of evangelical growth’ as Latin America becomes more and more Pentecostal, and many knowledgeable scholars have questioned how long it would take for Latin America’s Protestant boom to take an overtly political turn<sup>5</sup> (Parker and Olavarria 2016). With the politics of Dominionism it appears that the buried giant of Pentecostal political activism has, at last, finally roused itself. Or has it?

It is important to stress once again that many Christians—even most evangelicals and non-NAR Pentecostals—emphatically do not subscribe to the NAR, Dominion theology, or Christian nationalism, at least not in so many words. Even as they may agree on certain key issues, such as the efficacy of prayer

<sup>4</sup> Edir Macedo, *Orixás, Caboclos e Guias, deuses ou demônios?*, (São Paulo: Unipro, 1980). This book was reissued in a new edition 1997 to a much larger readership and sold more than 3 million copies.

<sup>5</sup> I borrow this phrase from David Stoll’s 1990 book, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, Stoll 1990), which, along with David Martin’s *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, Martin 1990), published the same year, was among the first full-length scholarly monographs to examine this question.

to affect human agency and outcomes, and the importance of following clear moral guidelines in public and private life, Christians outside the NAR are deeply critical of what they consider to be its faulty theology, the overweening and unquestioned ‘authority’ of dubious ‘prophets and apostles’, and what they take as its severe deviations from Biblical teachings. The revulsion that many Christians and others feel toward the NAR is not due to the conservative moral values that it champions (with these, they are actually likely to agree), but rather with the NAR’s claim to a secret proprietary and exclusive power relationship with God that subverts the democratic process and values. Some believe the movement heretical; many consider its political implications dangerous.<sup>6</sup> The gist of this work is not that Latin American evangelicals have become politically influential—that is only to be expected, given their numbers— but it is also unlikely that, as a disparate group, they would back a single slate of candidates anywhere, given their many divisions and differences. The point is, rather, that a significant minority movement within Pentecostal Christianity with a clear agenda and methodology, hidden in plain sight, has become a highly influential player within Latin America’s political arena. Christian Restorationism and its offspring, Dominionism, as its proponents and detractors both agree, have profound implications for the future.

The Dominionists have proven themselves to be extremely adept at tapping into deep veins of social discontent and moral anxieties, especially in the hot zones of culture, race, and, above all, sexuality. The fact that the prophets and apostles are governed by a specific vision that is largely opaque to those outside the movement provides them with a cover that allows them to steadily expand their influence in the quest for dominion without transparency. Above all, they move forward with the utmost confidence in the righteousness of their grand plan to restore and redeem not only their own countries, but the world itself.

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<sup>6</sup> There is a no shortage of anti-Dominion screed readily available on websites, blogs, and social media. See for example, Sandy Simpson, ‘Dominionism Exposed’, Apologetics Coordination Team, 2 February 2006 (Simpson 2006); ‘La Iglesia offshore de Harold Caballeros’, *Plaza Publica*, 9 May 2016, <https://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/la-iglesia-offshore-de-harold-caballeros>; ‘Harold Caballeros—Abandona Guatemala’, *The Guatemala Chronicle*, 25 September 2015, <https://guatemalachronicle.wordpress.com/2015/09/22/harold-caballeros-abandona-guatemala/>; Falso Profeta y Apóstol Rony Chavez Denunciado, 2020, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTjFmWpleVc>; Falso apóstol y profeta Rony Chaves-El papa de Costa Rica, 2020, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvSeTIE-g-0>.

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