

*del miedo de los fundamentalismos: La campaña 'Con mis hijos no te metas' en Colombia, Ecuador y Perú*, eds. Laura González Vélez et al. Lima: Flora Tristán, 13–57.

## Religious Patterns of Neoconservatism in Latin America

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X20000082, e2

During the last four decades, Latin America has witnessed the political strengthening of collective actors with conflicting agendas: feminist and LGBTQ+ movements on one side, and Catholic and Pentecostal Evangelical sectors on the other. While the first two movements focus on gender equality and the extension of sexual and reproductive rights, the Pentecostal and Catholic sectors have also adopted a political identity, but with an agenda prioritizing the defense of religious freedom and Christian sexual morality. Far from being a holdover from the past, the political strategies employed by these religious sectors continue to affect public debate across much of Latin America today.

These religious actors and their agendas are part of a reactionary movement that is consolidating its presence in Latin America. Many terms are used to capture and understand this phenomenon, and among them, reference to a “new conservatism” or “neoconservatism” is gaining centrality. In spite of its limitations, this term allows us to identify, as we do here, some of the articulations and patterns characterizing the political mobilization of the religious across the region.

### THE CONCEPT OF NEOCONSERVATISM

The term “neoconservatism” has been adopted in recent studies with the purpose of not only revealing the conservative ideology behind emerging conflicts, but also shedding light on the types of political coalitions among different actors — religious and nonreligious — that want to

maintain the region's patriarchal social order and its capitalist economy. In the case of conservative Christians, Evangelicals in particular, some authors explore elective similarities between their movements and neoliberal politics in Latin American countries (Lacerda 2019; Mariano and Biroli 2017).

The use of the term "neoconservative," like many other terms, has limitations. Yet it allows us to locate recent developments in the current political context. Following Brown (2006), the concept of neoconservatism makes reference to a political rationality expressed in a strong regulatory (sexual) morality. This rationality favors a form of political culture and politics of subjectivation that prioritizes legal mobilization to protect and guarantee a sexual morality grounded in the heterosexual family and legitimized by its reproductive potential. Apart from the actors and their arguments, neoconservatism must be understood, according to Brown, as a model of governance and citizenship.

As a concept, neoconservatism allows us to understand how religious sectors have reacted to changes in the regulation of the sexual order. Without denying the historical influence of religion over sexual morality, the prefix "neo" draws attention to those characteristics that distinguish the phenomenon in today's democracies. Here, we propose some dimensions with the purpose of understanding the complex religious patterns that characterize neoconservatism in Latin America.

## DIMENSIONS AND PATTERNS OF NEOCONSERVATISM

The prefix "neo" sets the phenomenon in a differentiated temporality marked mainly by the impact of feminist and LGBTQ+ movements. Important legal advancements in various societies, such as the liberalization of abortion laws, the recognition of same-sex marriage, and the approval of gender identity laws, have unintentionally created complex alliances between religious and secular actors holding patriarchal perspectives and an anti-Marxist ideology. The current conservative reorganizations are an expression of a reactive politicization (Vaggione 2005, 2017) unleashed by the success of feminist and LGBTQ+ movements in the region. Reacting to that, religious actors have adapted their strategies and arguments to maximize their impact on the regulation of sexuality.

Contemporary forms of conservatism have also produced strong alliances and marked affinities between Evangelical and Catholic sectors —

alliances that were previously unthinkable. Even though the Catholic hierarchy has long sought to influence the state in defense of a reproductivist and marital morality, today's neoconservatism also includes actors from the Evangelical field. This circumstantial alliance between Catholic and traditionalist Evangelical actors, led by the noticeable growth of Pentecostals in several countries on the continent (Pérez Guadalupe and Grundberger 2018), defends the heterosexual family, life from the moment of conception, and Christian morality, leaving aside the moral disputes within Catholicism and Pentecostalism.

Despite the doctrinal differences, forms of organization, and historical confrontation between Evangelicals and the Catholic Church, they nonetheless share an antigender agenda and work as allies in several countries in the region. Even more, a tendency of mimicry in Pentecostal sectors can be seen in those circles of political power connected to the Catholic Church. Such sectors now adopt strategies and discursive configurations — the association of abortion with the culture of death, the narrative of gender ideology — associated with Catholic conservative actors. It is also true that the influence of the cultural agenda of Christians from the United States on Latin American Pentecostals has increased and that exchanges of Christian regional leaders with transnational pro-life movements and pro-family associations are becoming more and more common.

Neoconservatism is also characterized by a marked juridification of morality.<sup>1</sup> Religious conservative sectors have taken their concern for the moral regulation of sexuality to the legal field, particularly the human rights field, as a strategy to confront feminist and LGBTI movements. The overlap between religious, moral, and secular laws is a fundamental component of Catholic natural law. As a reaction to the incorporation of sexual and reproductive rights as part of the human rights agenda, the Catholic Church activated an understanding of human rights based on a universal sexual morality that defends the natural family and the procreation function of sexuality.

The tendency to view moral positions in terms of rights is not limited to Catholics. Pentecostals, which have become hegemonic among Evangelicals in the region, have also been making use of human rights grammar to defend freedom of belief and religion, the prerogatives of confessional institutions, and, in some societies, the inclusion of

1. The concept of juridification refers to the increasing use of legal norms to solve political problems (for a debate on this concept, see Blichner and Molander 2008).

Christian moral principles in constitutional frames. The strategy of public confrontation — in the media, the church, the state, and the streets — with those social sectors that defend an ethical pluralism demonstrates the tension between the right to gender equality and the right to religious freedom and reveals the increasing role of Pentecostal leadership in the fight against sexual citizenship, legalization of abortion, and sexual education in schools (Jones and Dulbecco 2019; Machado 2018; Pecheny and de la Dehesa 2014).

Another characteristic of neoconservatism is its operation in democratic contexts, even though some of them may be fragile democracies. After decades of authoritarian governments and/or military dictatorships, in many circumstances legitimized by the Catholic hierarchy, several countries in the region have achieved democratic stability (at least in formal terms). This new scenario enabled (and perhaps encouraged) conservative sectors to use public intervention strategies in accordance with the channels of open participation that democratization has provided. In this way, it is possible to observe the proliferation of civil society organizations, confessional political parties, and/or public officials that, becoming absorbed in their religious principles, seek to impact the state and its laws.

Conservative Catholic and Pentecostal Evangelical actors “maximize” democratic channels so as to remain influential in this new context. These actors have learned to use those democratic channels to move forward with their agendas. It is possible to observe their behavior in several arenas — the judiciary, legislative and executive branches, universities, and organizations of civil society — contributing to the strengthening of social and political movements that have placed the feminist and sexual diversity movements in a defensive position in countries such as Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Paraguay, Ecuador, and Chile.

Finally, neoconservatism stands out for its transnational dimension, which contributes to its relatively homogeneous circulation in the region. Without denying the peculiarities of each country, the political history, the forms of religious regulation, the degree of pluralization of society, and levels of inequality, contemporary conservatisms share a common agenda that goes beyond each country’s national context. An example is the increasing use of the concept “gender ideology” to describe the demands of the feminist and LGBTQ+ movements. Even though the term is used at different moments and with different intensities, in just a few years, it has diffused throughout the region. Its construction and paths show a tangled complex of actors located in

different countries (from the North as well as from the South) and identified with religion in different ways (religious leaders, both Catholic and Evangelical, and intellectuals).

To summarize, the actions of feminist and LGBTQ+ movements have been followed by different rearticulations of political forms of religious conservatism, some of which are evident in the characteristics proposed in this essay. We are not, of course, facing a completely new phenomenon. However, each of these characteristics points to different patterns that become analytical and normative challenges for academic agendas in Latin America. Deepening the analysis of these patterns will allow not only an understanding of neoconservatism as a contemporary phenomenon but also of the complex links between the religious and the political present in democracies.

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