Abstract – Experiments in missionary writing: Protestant missions and the *Imprensa Evangelica* (Evangelical Press) in Brazil, 1864-1892

The object of this article is the periodical *Imprensa Evangelica*, published between 1864 and 1892 in Brazil by Presbyterian missionaries. Throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century, the *Imprensa* furnished Brazilian evangelical minorities with a means of crafting new religious identities and of asserting their presence in the public arena. Its editors defended the political rights of non-Catholics in the country, held religious controversies with Catholic publications in Brazil and Portugal, and intervened in on-going public debates on church-state separation and the abolition of slavery. Finally, the article examines how the periodical’s circulation generated new reading practices in Brazil.

**Experiments in missionary writing: Protestant missions and the *Imprensa Evangelica* (Evangelical Press) in Brazil, 1864-1892**

Pedro Feitoza

Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge

This article examines the production and circulation of the Protestant periodical *Imprensa Evangelica* (Evangelical Press) in nineteenth-century Brazil, the periodical’s engagement with the religious and political debates of the time, and its role in the establishment and expansion of the Protestant missionary work in Brazil. In doing so, this article aims to integrate two distinct scholarly trends in World Christianity: studies on Latin American evangelicalism, on the one hand, and on Christian literacy, on the other. Emerging in the 1960s with the influential monographs of Christian Lalive D’Epinay and Emilio Willems, academic studies of Latin American evangelicalism acquired new depth in the English-speaking academic world with David Martin’s and David Stoll’s ground breaking monographs, published in 1990. These studies analysed broader social processes associated with religious change in Latin America, the remarkable and uneven growth of Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity across the subcontinent, and the transformations it consequently entailed, such as the reconfiguration of the Latin American religious landscape, the emergence of new economic cultures, and the dissemination of evangelicalism among the poor and dispossessed.[[1]](#endnote-1) Subsequent research in this field contributed to diversify the scope of analyses and enrich the study of Latin American Christianities by paying attention to the impact of evangelicals and evangelical politicians in Brazilian politics,[[2]](#endnote-2) the reconfiguration of gender relations in Colombia,[[3]](#endnote-3) the contrasting approaches of Pentecostalism and progressive Catholicism to popular culture,[[4]](#endnote-4) the influence of evangelical emphasis on self-improvement and moral purity in Venezuela,[[5]](#endnote-5) the emergence of Protestant social theologies,[[6]](#endnote-6) among other topics. Despite the enormous variety of these studies, it is possible to distinguish some trends throughout. First, the majority of contributions come from the social sciences, especially sociology and anthropology, with historical research being a small, though influential, minority.[[7]](#endnote-7) Second, most of these analyses concentrate on the revival of Latin American Christianities in the post-World War II period, whereas little attention is paid to the earlier history of evangelicalism and the establishment of mission societies in the nineteenth century.[[8]](#endnote-8) Finally, although Pentecostalism was the driving force that pushed evangelical growth in the twentieth century, mainline Protestants with their contributions to the spread of Christian literacy and education have been ignored.

The present analysis of the *Imprensa Evangelica* in Brazil addresses some of these omissions by engaging with recent studies in Christian literacy and missionary print. The development of mass print and the worldwide dissemination of missionary societies in the nineteenth century played key roles in connecting religious actors across the globe and in standardising religious doctrines and practices.[[9]](#endnote-9) Religious mass print simultaneously provided missionaries with a powerful technology of conversion and reshaped the contours of global Protestantism. The social and religious impacts of Christian literacy have been particularly well-studied by Africanist scholars: translation of Bibles, tracts, and books into the various African societies which European missionaries encountered required interaction and dialogue with indigenous converts, a process that indigenised missionary literature itself.[[10]](#endnote-10) As Isabel Hofmeyr has shown in her influential study of the circulation of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in Africa, indigenous Christians disseminated John Bunyan’s classic work in various ways and via different media, such as postcards and magic lantern slides, which enabled them to reconfigure and reorder atomised bits and pieces of the narrative.[[11]](#endnote-11) Although European missionaries envisaged literacy as an instrument for the domestication of the natives’ intellectual habits and for fostering introspective reading habits, African indigenous converts appropriated Christian texts in divergent ways not anticipated by their missionary interlocutors, including reading texts aloud, memorising and reciting long biblical passages, or even using their pages as cigarette- and wrapping-paper.[[12]](#endnote-12) Religious texts produced by African Christians, alongside Bibles and tracts translated into the vernacular languages, furnished evangelicals across the continent with ideas and doctrines that shaped new religious identities, engendered new liturgical practices in Christian congregations, and created proto-nationalist notions of ethnicity and race.[[13]](#endnote-13)

In keeping with this recent scholarship on Christian literacy, this article analyses how the *Imprensa Evangelica* contributed to the making of new evangelical identities in the last decades of nineteenth-century Brazil, when a series of clashes between the Imperial state and the Catholic Church took place and prompted liberal intellectuals to promote the cause of church-state separation. In a context of competition and conflict with a revitalised conservative Catholicism, this Protestant periodical, alongside a number of other anti-Catholic publications from the secular press, furnished Brazilian converts and foreign missionaries with the means for articulating alternative Christian religious identities. A complex and far-reaching network encompassing evangelical colporteurs and mission stations in Brazil and Portugal enabled the *Imprensa* to circulate not only across most of the Brazilian territory, but also into parts of the Lusophone Atlantic. American and Brazilian missionaries and laypeople who contributed to the periodical followed closely public debates on religious freedom, republicanism and slavery, and interacted with both the secular and religious presses at the time. In mobilising their small constituencies in Brazil and receiving funds and material support from evangelical organisations in the United States and Britain, the *Imprensa* editors were able to keep the periodical circulating for nearly three decades, a significant achievement for a religious minority at that time. Furthermore, the periodical’s circulation generated new reading practices in late nineteenth-century Brazil, when more than eighty per cent of the population were illiterate,[[14]](#endnote-14) prompting Bible-readers, colporteurs and evangelists to read aloud sermons, recite catechisms, and sing hymns printed on the pages of *Imprensa* to their congregations and in family meetings. By means of the pages of *Imprensa Evangelica* Brazilian evangelicals projected themselves into the public sphere and into the transnational networks that integrated Protestant missionary efforts in the Lusophone Atlantic. In attending to these literary endeavours, this article enhances the already strong Africanist studies of the intertwined histories of evangelicalism and print by supplying a uniquely Latin American perspective.

**The place of *Imprensa Evangelica* in the Brazilian missionary enterprise**

Throughout the nineteenth century, the establishment and expansion of Protestant missions and churches in the Brazilian Empire was the result of two interrelated processes: foreign immigration and the work of mission societies. When the Portuguese royal court fled the Napoleonic invasion of Portugal, with support of the British navy, and moved its administrative centre temporarily to Rio de Janeiro in 1808, Portuguese Imperial authorities made a series of diplomatic, commercial and religious concessions to the British Empire, allowing the establishment of Anglican chapels in Brazilian coastal cities.[[15]](#endnote-15) Upon gaining independence from Portugal in 1822 and throughout most of the nineteenth century, the promotion of foreign immigration remained an important policy of the Brazilian Empire. Brazilian policymakers in the 1840s and 1850s believed that European immigrants would play a civilising role in supplying the country with an alternative workforce in the face of a declining, though still pervasive, slave labour.[[16]](#endnote-16) German and Swiss Lutheran immigrants pioneered this migratory movement settling in the Southern provinces of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina and Paraná, and cities in the coastal provinces of Rio de Janeiro and Espírito Santo. From the 1860s onwards, in consequence of the Civil War in the United States, Southern Americans also made their way to Brazil, attracted by the country’s expanding economy, cheap lands, and continued slavery. The Confederates settled different regions in the country, such as the provinces of Pará, in the Amazon region, and Bahia, on the Atlantic coast. Their main destination, however, was São Paulo, with its burgeoning coffee plantations and expanding railroads, where Confederates established Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist congregations.[[17]](#endnote-17)

These communities provided American and British missionaries with an important initial basis. In fact, Presbyterian and Methodist mission stations of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo began their evangelistic work from the late 1850s onwards addressing American and German immigrants before turning themselves to the Brazilians.[[18]](#endnote-18) In this period, Protestantism was particularly appealing to marginalised urban and rural social groups of the expanding agricultural frontiers and growing cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Paraná, and Bahia. It was the possibility of establishing independent communities, freed from the traditional social and religious norms, in which members could exercise elective action that was so attractive to disenfranchised immigrants, the emerging middle-class, poor urban workers, and small farmers.[[19]](#endnote-19) The most successful missionaries in this period were the American Presbyterians who, after the opening of their mission station in Rio de Janeiro in 1859, founded dozens of churches throughout the country from the 1870s onwards, established numerous parish schools and a few fully-equipped secondary colleges, prepared a generation of distinguished Brazilian and Portuguese-speaking pastors, and engaged the laity in the missionary work. In 1888, when the Presbyterian national synod was created, the mission had opened churches and congregations in twelve of the twenty provinces of the Brazilian Empire, totalling approximately three-thousand communicant members distributed in sixty-one churches; of these, thirty-four were located in the Province of São Paulo. Some of these churches showed signs of autonomy, such as the São Paulo Church, that had become self-supporting and whose pastor was the influential Brazilian minister and grammarian Revd Eduardo Carlos Pereira.[[20]](#endnote-20) However, due to financial constraints and numerical limitations, less than a half of these congregations had permanent ordained ministers. In the face of this, it was the laity, especially schoolteachers, colporteurs and Bible-readers, who took over the task of carrying out the evangelistic work, assembling the believers, and conducting the daily life of churches and congregations.

Until 1889, when the Monarchy was overthrown, Imperial laws on religious freedom and ecclesiastical administration proved to be disruptive for both the non-Catholic minorities in Brazil and to the Catholic Church. The Constitution of 1824 established Catholicism as the Empire’s official religion and incorporated a Portuguese colonial tradition, the state patronage, into its juridical apparatus, limiting the autonomy of the Catholic Church and subjecting it to the political authorities.[[21]](#endnote-21) The Empire, not the Church, was in charge of the collection of tithes and appointment of bishops, whereas the Provincial Assemblies, not the ecclesiastical authorities, were constitutionally entitled to create new parishes or divide the existing ones.[[22]](#endnote-22) Non-Catholics, on the other hand, were granted the right to celebrate their religious services with freedom. However, their houses of worship could not resemble religious buildings, and they could neither vote nor run for the Parliament and the Provincial Assemblies. Complementary laws of the late 1820s did not recognise the validity of non-Catholic marriages and subjected municipal cemeteries to ecclesiastical control.[[23]](#endnote-23) These laws were not homogeneously enforced throughout the Empire, granting non-Catholic religious agents some room for manoeuvre in their negotiations with local political authorities.[[24]](#endnote-24) In the face of these restrictions, Protestant missionaries and Brazilian converts were able to take advantage of other opportunities to expand their missionary programme, especially the weaknesses of the system of public education, that facilitated the creation of private schools, and the Emperor’s consistent defence of freedom of the press.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The *Imprensa Evangelica* was founded in this context in 1864 by the Revd Ashbel Simonton, the first missionary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church of the United States (BFM) in Brazil, alongside two members of the Presbyterian Church of Rio de Janeiro: the civil servant and poet Antonio dos Santos Neves, and the periodical’s manager Domingos Quintana.[[26]](#endnote-26) According to David Vieira, it was the centrality of religious controversies in the pages of the Brazilian secular press, especially the strong anti-Catholic trend of some journals and publishing houses, that first caught Simonton’s attention.[[27]](#endnote-27) The Scottish medical-missionary Robert Kalley, founder of the Presbyterian missionary work in Madeira Island, Portugal, in the late 1830s, and of the Congregational Fluminense Evangelical Church in Rio de Janeiro in 1858, pioneered the involvement of Protestant missionaries with the Brazilian press by translating John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* into Portuguese in 1856. Bunyan’s classic was serialised and published in thirty-five numbers of the secular periodical *Correio Mercantil*, that had one of the largest reading publics at that time in Brazil.[[28]](#endnote-28) These important antecedents played a crucial role in prompting Simonton to assemble his editorial team and launch the eight-page *Imprensa Evangelica*, Latin America’s first Protestant periodical.[[29]](#endnote-29) The paper’s periodicity and place of publication varied between its foundation and suspension in 1892. It was first issued fortnightly in Rio de Janeiro by the Laemmert brothers’ publishing house, one of the largest publishers in nineteenth-century Brazil. Later, in 1879, the periodical was transferred to the responsibility of the São Paulo Presbyterian Church, and between 1878-80 published every week. Missionaries decided to transform it into a thirty-two page monthly magazine in 1881, but returned to its journal style and twice-a-month appearance in the following year.

The provenance of funds and material used in the publication of *Imprensa Evangelica* highlights the connections of Protestant missionaries in Brazil with British and American evangelical organisations, and illustrates how Brazilian converts were also animated by the voluntarist impulse of nineteenth-century evangelicalism. Its editors believed that the periodical should become self-supporting, relying on subscriptions and contributions of churches. The Revd Alexander Blackford, who became editor in 1867 upon Simonton’s death, encouraged congregants of the Presbyterian Church of Rio de Janeiro to contribute with the missionary publishing enterprise, which helped to relieve the financial burden of the mission station.[[30]](#endnote-30) Since annual subscriptions covered approximately half of the *Imprensa* expenses in 1880, the BFM was responsible for the remainder of the costs.[[31]](#endnote-31) Besides local fundraising and American capital, the periodical also received material support from the London-based Religious Tract Society (RTS). Simonton requested financial support from the RTS Committee in 1866, which was at first denied on grounds that the Committee could not spend money in a publication they could not monitor.[[32]](#endnote-32) Twenty years later, when the RTS began to expand its operations in the Lusophone Atlantic, the Committee decided to support the *Imprensa* by sending fifty reams of paper to its then editor, the American missionary George Chamberlain.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Alongside the translation and circulation of religious tracts and Bibles, the *Imprensa* was part of a wider missionary program in nineteenth-century Brazil. This program involved, among other initiatives, the provision of formal education, and the production and dissemination of religious literature.[[34]](#endnote-34) Brazilian pastors and foreign missionaries believed that the circulation of evangelical texts and Bibles, operating beyond the reach of missionaries and evangelists, could initiate processes of religious change and prompt unaided conversions to Protestantism. In doing so they echoed nineteenth-century evangelical notions of textual agency that attributed exceptional power and authority to religious texts.[[35]](#endnote-35) In a report sent to the BFM in 1892, Presbyterian missionaries noted that ‘the *Imprensa* has proved an invaluable pioneer agency’, claiming that the periodical introduced the ‘self-evident’ evangelical message to non-evangelicals out of the reach of missionaries, and that it was a useful tool for the instruction and edification of local congregations destitute of ordained ministers.[[36]](#endnote-36) They also wrote to the sending bodies that the periodical initiated processes of conversion and prepared the way for other modes of evangelistic work, elements that authorised the high expenses it generated.[[37]](#endnote-37)

In order to reduce the costs associated with the periodical, editors connected its printing processes with other areas of the missionary work in Brazil. Students of the São Paulo Presbyterian school who received financial aid from the mission station helped with the work of typesetting.[[38]](#endnote-38) The training of Brazilian and Portuguese converts to the Presbyterian pastorate in this period involved some preparation in mission schools and in the publishing enterprise. As a consequence, licensed preachers, ordained pastors, and some church elders contributed in different ways to the *Imprensa Evangelica*, fulfilling the vision of a self-supporting periodical. In 1880, for instance, the American missionary John Beatty Howell, who was then responsible for the periodical, transferred his editorial responsibilities to José Zacarias de Miranda and Eduardo Carlos Pereira, licensed preachers of the São Paulo Church who were later ordained to the Presbyterian ministry and contributed to the *Imprensa* until its suspension.[[39]](#endnote-39) From the pages of the periodical they also launched important initiatives aimed to make Brazilian churches self-sustaining and self-governing, such as the Brazilian Society of Evangelical Tracts, created by Pereira in September 1883. Subscribers and contributors to the Society had their names and contributions published on the pages of the periodical, a strategy that bore resemblance to mechanism of fundraising employed by European and North American mission societies.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Converts and Brazilian ministers played a crucial role in the making of the periodical in its early years. The first Brazilian Presbyterian pastor and former Catholic priest, José Manoel da Conceição, became an active contributor after his ordination in 1865 up until his premature death in 1873. In trying to protect contributors from retaliations, the majority of contributions to the *Imprensa* in its early years were anonymous. Conceição’s hymns and poems, however, usually carried his signature.[[41]](#endnote-41) The note on his death, published in January 1874, recalled not only his itinerant work in the provinces of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, but also his role in the first years of the periodical.[[42]](#endnote-42) Two prominent figures of the Brazilian literary and political establishments, Julio César Ribeiro and Miguel Vieira Ferreira, also left important marks in the periodical. Julio Ribeiro was a journalist and novelist who joined the Presbyterians in 1870, and acted as a teacher of the Presbyterian School of São Paulo. In the same year he began to contribute to the *Imprensa*, debating ecclesiastical history with the Rio de Janeiro-based Catholic periodical *O Apóstolo* (The Apostle), founded in 1866 and one of the central expressions of the nineteenth-century conservative Catholic revival in Brazil.[[43]](#endnote-43) Religious controversies and discussions between the *Imprensa* and *O Apóstolo* generated an intense exchange of information and communication in the Brazilian religious public sphere. Miguel Ferreira was an engineer by training, intellectual, and one of the founders of the Republican Party of Rio de Janeiro. He joined the Presbyterians in 1873 and was soon elected an elder of the Rio de Janeiro Presbyterian Church, where he frequently preached and helped the American missionaries in evangelistic trips to the countryside. In 1879 he separated from the Presbyterians and founded the Brazilian Evangelical Church, that combined Protestant, Catholic, and Spiritualist practices and doctrines.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Despite the declared intention of the first editors in eschewing political discussions and concentrating only upon religious affairs,[[45]](#endnote-45) the involvement of these Brazilian converts ended up projecting the *Imprensa Evangelica* into the religious and political debates of the 1870s, as they brought both anti-Catholic controversies and the defence of religious freedom to the forefront of the periodical.[[46]](#endnote-46) Besides, American missionaries believed that the participation of native converts and Portuguese-speaking ministers in the production of the periodical helped to popularise the *Imprensa* among the Brazilian public.[[47]](#endnote-47)

**The *Imprensa Evangelica* and the political and religious transformations of Brazil**

Throughout the 1860s and 1870s the *Imprensa Evangelica* contributors used the pages of the periodical to defend the rights of non-Catholics in the Brazilian Empire. Two specific issues attracted their attention during this period: the creation of civil registration of marriages, and the secularisation of cemeteries. Brazilian Protestants, attentive to the interest of the Empire’s policymakers in attracting European immigrants, as well as opposed to the juridical restrictions imposed on non-Catholics, claimed in the pages of *Imprensa* that Imperial regulations of marriage and freedom of worship discouraged immigrant families and drove them away from Brazil.[[48]](#endnote-48) In 1869 the Empire issued a decree recognising the legal validity of all marriages celebrated by non-Catholic ordained priests, a reform that did not satisfy the editors of the Protestant periodical, who continued to view the implementation of civil registrations of marriages an issue of religious tolerance, and as a sign of higher civilizational standards. They affirmed that the adamant opposition of *O Apóstolo* to this reform demonstrated the ‘antipathy of the Roman Church in its spirit and its institutions with the spirit of this century and the institutions and reforms that the country demands’.[[49]](#endnote-49) Similar arguments can be seen in the periodical’s defence of the secularisation of cemeteries. In 1870, the *Imprensa* reproduced an Imperial resolution instructing all bishops and presidents of provinces to separate areas in municipal cemeteries to the burial of non-Catholics, and carry out all the religious and political ceremonies to enforce it. The periodical’s contributors praised this decision arguing that, on the one hand, it would satisfy all those who defend ‘the progress of the country and the religious and social wellbeing of the people’ and, on the other, that it stood as a ‘conclusive proof of the essential antipathy between romanism and the free institutions of our century and country’.[[50]](#endnote-50) In their opinion, ‘every single act of religious intolerance is an iniquitous attack against the inalienable rights with which the Creator endowed men and against the principles consecrated in Christ’s Gospel that we profess.’[[51]](#endnote-51) In associating the church-state alliance with despotism, religious tolerance with social wellbeing, and religious liberty with the natural and inalienable rights of men, Brazilian evangelicals connected their theological doctrines with Enlightenment and liberal notions of progress and tolerance.[[52]](#endnote-52)

During the same period, new critical commentaries of global Catholicism and church-state relations in Brazil crystallized in the pages of *Imprensa Evangelica*. These emerged in reaction to the nineteenth-century conservative Catholic revival, also called Ultramontane reform, and its reverberations in Brazil. Affected by the disaggregating effects of revolutionary and nationalist movements in Europe, the Catholic hierarchy sought to reassert the centrality of Rome in the worldwide Catholic community, the authority of the pope as the spiritual head of the Church, and to popularise modern devotions, such as the Sacred Heart.[[53]](#endnote-53) In spite of their attacks on republicanism and modern science, Ultramontane Catholicism did promote modernisation, as both clergymen and laypeople created voluntary associations, made use of modern mass-circulation media, and established modern schools to deprived social groups and to train the clergy.[[54]](#endnote-54) From the 1860s onwards, influential Brazilian Catholic clergymen, in line with the conservative revival of the European Church, began to extend the effects of the Ultramontane reform to the Brazilian Church. A new generation of well-educated clergymen trained in European institutions occupied central positions in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and attempted to revitalise a church short of resources by mobilising the laity, demanding high moral standards from their fellow Catholic ministers and parishioners, and drawing the Brazilian Church closer to Rome. These initiatives led them into serious clashes with the state patronage.[[55]](#endnote-55) Relations between the Empire and the Church became increasingly problematic in the early 1870s, when the bishop of Olinda-Recife, Dom Vital Oliveira, and the bishop of Belém, Dom Antônio Costa, following the instructions of papal bulls that had not been approved by the Empire, demanded the expulsion of Masonic members from the lay brotherhoods under their dioceses. Imperial ministers reacted to this by bringing the bishops into trial and condemning them in 1874 to four years of imprisonment with labour. This conflict, known as the Religious Question,[[56]](#endnote-56) was frequently and extensively examined by the *Imprensa Evangelica*.

The *Imprensa* editors followed closely the unfolding of these events, lamenting in dramatic articles the policy of Pius IX, and the dogmas of papal infallibility and of the Immaculate Conception.[[57]](#endnote-57) On the occasion of Dom Vital’s condemnation, the *Imprensa* editors praised the Catholic bishop’s religious zeal and courage in his choice to remain faithful to the oath of obedience to the laws of his church. They argued, however, that both the bishop and the Empire found themselves in a paradoxical situation: the bishop, forced to obey either the laws of his country or the doctrines of the Vatican; the Empire, in establishing Catholicism as its official religion, was bound to a similar set of rules and orders emanated from Rome, a supranational power. According to the *Imprensa Evangelica*, the only possible solution to this controversy was the complete separation between church and state, a principle that remained at the forefront of the periodical until the late 1880s, and that continued to be viewed by Protestants as the only solution to their own troubled situation in the Brazilian Empire.[[58]](#endnote-58) These ideas were in tune with a secular periodical called *O Novo Mundo* (The New World) that circulated widely in Brazil, and was edited from New York by the influential Brazilian journalist and Protestant convert José Carlos Rodrigues.[[59]](#endnote-59)

At the same time, Protestants began to argue more systematically in their journal that recent events in Brazil and in the world showed how religious change, and not racial difference, was the main driver of social progress and economic modernisation. In 1875 Miguel Vieira Ferreira translated into Portuguese a tract written by the Belgian economist Émile de Laveleye titled *The Future of the Catholic Peoples*. The central argument of this influential text was that the social and individual effects of modernisation, such as education, personal cleanliness, economic progress, democracy, and freedom, flourished wherever Protestantism triumphed over rival faiths, whereas Catholicism, with its centralised system of administration and resistance to modern political reforms, predisposed societies to corrupt despotism.[[60]](#endnote-60) The *Imprensa Evangelica* celebrated this publication, asserting that it was a timely and decisive contribution to an on-going debate on the effects of Catholicism and rationalism in contemporary societies, and continued to publish some of the tract’s excerpts in its pages.[[61]](#endnote-61)

In periods such as these of religious and political turmoil, Brazilian and foreign Protestant missionaries laid out their positions in wider public debates and associated themselves with different groups of the civil society. A considerable body of scholarship on Latin American evangelicalism has stressed that Protestant missionaries and converts, alongside other religious minorities, strengthened their connections with liberal-radical groups on the continent who advocated radical political reforms such as the complete separation between church and state. Masonic lodges, ‘societies of thought’, and circles of mutual aid constituted the main spaces of sociability that assembled these groups.[[62]](#endnote-62) The pages of *Imprensa Evangelica*, on the other hand, show a different aspect of these evangelical public engagements. According to its editors, parliamentary debates on the Religious Question cut across political lines. They argued that one could find in the Senate, ‘liberals and conservatives who accept the *infallibility* and think according to the *syllabus*’,[[63]](#endnote-63) and in the Chamber of Deputies a conservative who defends civil marriage.[[64]](#endnote-64) Likewise, the periodical often praised the modernising effects of political reforms carried out by the Conservative Party, such as the abolition of slavery and the progressive concession of political rights to non-Catholics. They reproduced government bills signed by Paulino José Soares Souza, a Conservative Party minister of the late 1860s and 1870s, and condemned the actions of the Liberal Party senator Zacarias de Góes e Vasconcelos, who defended the actions of Dom Vital in the parliament.[[65]](#endnote-65)

In eschewing bipolar political associations, Protestants used the pages of *Imprensa Evangelica* to interact with various actors across the religious and political spectrums in Brazil, associating themselves with those committed to the causes of religious liberty and laicisation of the state, irrespective of formal political affiliation. American Protestant missionaries and Brazilian converts thought that despite the limited liberality of the Constitution and the progressive leanings of Emperor Pedro II, their political rights were unstable in the Empire, dependant upon negotiations with Police Delegates, local authorities, foreign diplomats, and Imperial ministers.[[66]](#endnote-66) They feared that a conservative Catholic counter-reaction during a possible reign of Princess Isabel, the religiously devout daughter of Pedro II, would threaten the progress of religious liberty in the country.[[67]](#endnote-67)

If editors and contributors to the Protestant periodical gave central importance to issues of religious freedom and state laicisation since the early 1870s, the problem of slavery, certainly one of the most pressing concerns of nineteenth-century Brazil, made its way into the agenda of *Imprensa Evangelica* only in the following decade. The reasons for this late engagement with the abolitionist movement can be found in the configuration of Brazilian Protestant communities. Although some of the Presbyterian missionaries from the American North were sympathetic to the abolitionist cause, others, especially Southern American Baptists, still regarded slavery as an acceptable practice.[[68]](#endnote-68)

It was in 1884 that the problem of slavery made the headlines of the periodical. The abolition of slave labour in the Northern Province of Ceará in that year, and the publication of a resolute defence of abolitionism by Joaquim Nabuco, one of Brazil’s most renowned intellectuals, prompted the *Imprensa* editors to respond. The periodical reproduced excerpts of Nabuco’s book in which he affirmed that the promotion of European immigration and the existence of slavery were mutually exclusive practices whose peaceful coexistence was impossible.[[69]](#endnote-69) In the same year, the pastor of the Rio de Janeiro Presbyterian Church, the Revd J. Houston, preached a sermon, partly reproduced in the *Imprensa Evangelica*, asserting that Old Testament slavery was much diluted in comparison with the Brazilian system, that enslavement was only tolerated by the Mosaic Law, and, therefore, could not stand as a justification of contemporary Brazilian slavery.[[70]](#endnote-70) The strongest campaigner for the abolitionist cause among Brazilian and foreign Protestants, however, was the Revd Eduardo Carlos Pereira. In 1885 he made his debut in this on-going debate in the pages of the *Imprensa Evangelica* arguing that the subjugation of human beings tied slave owners to indolence, killed their moral sentiments, and injected ‘in our social organism the poison of slavery’.[[71]](#endnote-71) In the following year Pereira published an emphatic condemnation of the Brazilian system of slavery titled *The Christian Religion in its Relations with Slavery*, in which he brought together biblical texts from the Old and New Testaments alongside concepts of human rights and freedom borrowed from modern liberal thought, to argue that captivity was in irreconcilable opposition to Christianity.[[72]](#endnote-72) This tract was, later in that year, serialised and published in six separate numbers of the *Imprensa Evangelica*.[[73]](#endnote-73) Another Brazilian Protestant, José Carlos Rodrigues, also published ardent defences of abolitionism in his influential periodical *O Novo Mundo*.[[74]](#endnote-74) Whereas American missionaries adopted a conciliatory stance with regard to the abolitionist debate, avoiding possible conflicts with their sending bodies in the United States or with fellow American missionaries in the field, Brazilian converts and ministers were able to condemn slavery with impunity.

**The *Imprensa Evangelica* in motion: circulation and the creation of new religious identities**

In analysing a publication such as the *Imprensa Evangelica*, attention has to be paid to the various ways in which the periodical generated new reading practices in nineteenth-century Brazil, and to how its editors addressed the periodical to multiple audiences – local, national and transnational. Literary scholars and social scientists have been drawing attention to issues of circulation of texts and the constitution of publics and audiences in the last decades, conceptualising the public as an imagined entity that comes into being by means of circulation of discourse.[[75]](#endnote-75) Besides being a useful platform through which evangelicals engaged with wider public religious and political debates, the *Imprensa Evangelica* also acquired new functions and forms as it circulated throughout evangelical audiences in Brazil and other Lusophone societies.

The primary space of sociability in which the periodical was collectively read was the evangelical church. Throughout the nineteenth century, Baptist, Methodist, Congregational, and Presbyterian congregations inaugurated new forms of religious sociability in Brazil apart from the aristocratic institutions of the secular public sphere and separated from the overwhelming influence of the Catholic Church. Protestant churches, with their weekly meetings and democratic electoral systems, alongside mission schools, with their innovative pedagogical methods, brought together individuals of different social strata and served as a vehicle of institutional participation for Brazil’s emerging middle-class and other disenfranchised social groups.[[76]](#endnote-76)

American and Brazilian missionaries, due to the scarcity of ordained ministers in Brazil, attributed central importance to the texts they circulated, especially to the Bible, religious tracts, catechisms, and the *Imprensa Evangelica*.[[77]](#endnote-77) The periodical furnished lay leaders of small congregations with sermons, faith confessions, weekly devotionals for both collective and individual reading, and conversion narratives. The case of the Presbyterian Church of Ubatuba in the province of São Paulo is illustrative. Its leader was a man called José Joaquim Fernandes de Lima, who purchased evangelical tracts and a Bible from missionaries of the Rio de Janeiro Presbyterian Church in 1868. According to the history of foundation of the church, upon reading the Scriptures and other religious books Lima was convinced that ‘the religion in which he was raised was not the religion taught by Jesus and his apostles’.[[78]](#endnote-78) In 1874, after receiving a few books he had requested from the evangelical bookshop in Rio de Janeiro that came to him wrapped in an old number of the *Imprensa Evangelica*, which he read eagerly, Lima decided to subscribe the periodical and encouraged other people from Ubatuba to do the same. The church was created in 1880 with a ceremony celebrated by Brazilian and American ordained ministers of the Rio de Janeiro Church, but until the end of the decade the Ubatuba Church did not have an ordained pastor. One of the elders acted as a Bible-reader for the benefit of the congregation, reciting sermons taken from the *Imprensa Evangelica* alongside evangelical tracts and the Bible.[[79]](#endnote-79)

In many other places throughout the country lay leaders of evangelical congregations integrated religious texts and the *Imprensa* into the daily liturgical practices of their churches by reading aloud pages of catechisms and the periodical to the believers. The periodical had, in this sense, reading publics and audiences simultaneously, a fact that extended the reach of *Imprensa Evangelica* way beyond the limits of subscriptions. Dozens of churches scattered across the Provinces of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Bahia had this periodical, religious tracts, catechisms and the Bible as their main source of religious doctrine and instruction in the 1880s.[[80]](#endnote-80) Schoolteachers also used written texts such as the *Imprensa* and catechisms as primers in parish and Sunday schools. Moreover, editors encouraged subscribers to bind the various numbers of periodical together, so that they could keep serialised publications in order and take full benefit from them.[[81]](#endnote-81)

These reading practices facilitated by the circulation of evangelical literature and new forms of religious sociability in nineteenth-century Brazil also contributed to instil in its evangelical readers a renewed sense of belonging to a worldwide Christian communion. Historians of both African and European Christianity have shown how mission correspondence and the reading of missionary reports became conduits of transnational religious solidarity, and enabled believers and contributors to mission societies to imagine themselves as part of a global and fraternal fellowship of committed believers.[[82]](#endnote-82) Similarly, the *Imprensa Evangelica* sought to inspire in its readers this sense of belonging to a transnational imagined community of evangelical Christians. In the 1870s editors included two sections in the periodical titled ‘The Evangelisation of the World’ and ‘Religious News’, aimed to keep their readers abreast with the worldwide growth of Protestantism and dissemination of mission societies, especially in Africa.[[83]](#endnote-83) They usually registered the creation of new churches and ordination of ministers in Brazil in the ‘Religious News’ section, representing their own missionary work as a chapter of the wider international movement.

Interestingly, the periodical itself circulated in different Lusophone Protestant communities in both Portugal and Illinois in the American Midwest, where there was a group of Protestant Portuguese immigrants who had fled religious persecution in the Madeira Island. In fact, a thick network comprising London-based evangelical organisations, such as the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Religious Tract Society, Portuguese immigrants in Illinois and Brazil, and British missionaries connected the Protestant missionary work in the Lusophone Atlantic world.[[84]](#endnote-84) Evidence suggests that the *Imprensa Evangelica* began to circulate in Portugal as early as 1867. In this year editors affirmed that, by unclear means, some numbers of the periodical reached Portugal and stirred the opposition of Catholic journalists who objected to the legality of the Protestant propaganda and the circulation of evangelical Bibles there.[[85]](#endnote-85) From then on, the *Imprensa Evangelica* engaged in religious debates with Portuguese Catholic publications and frequently advertised the places, dates and times of religious services in both Lisbon and Porto.[[86]](#endnote-86) The Brazilian Presbyterian minister José Zacarias de Miranda published a series of articles between June and December 1885 responding to the critiques of a Portuguese writer named Cunha Carvalhaes, who depicted the evangelical missions in Portugal as erroneous and heretical. Miranda argued in his articles that the Catholic Church was not an apostolic institution because neither its head, the pope, nor its doctrines, that included the veneration of images, had been instituted by Christ and the Bible.[[87]](#endnote-87) Texts, ideas, and people moved in several directions across the transnational networks of nineteenth-century missionary societies, consolidating an evangelical transatlantic public sphere.[[88]](#endnote-88) Conscious of the existence of these connections, editors and contributors of the *Imprensa Evangelica* addressed this extended Lusophone reading public at times, projecting the periodical into the transnational circuits of global Protestantism.

Conversion narratives published in this period furnished Brazilian believers with means of refashioning individual subjectivities. In the early 1880s the *Imprensa* editors began to publish a monthly literary supplement granted to all subscribers. American missionaries affirmed to their sending bodies that one of these supplements, a conversion narrative published in 1885, had a powerful impact among the Brazilian public. This text, titled *My Conversion: revelations of a lady to her Catholic friend*, was written by an Italian immigrant called Ausonia who lived in Rio de Janeiro and became a convert there.[[89]](#endnote-89) Ausonia described her conversion as a process intimately connected with the reading of the Bible and of other religious texts, especially an anti-Catholic polemic titled *History of the Popes*. Upon getting these books from a friend, Ausonia spent a week reading them and felt deeply disturbed by the contrast between the Catholic faith she professed and the critical message of these books. She described this process as one of anguish and perplexity, in which all her cherished Catholic beliefs were deconstructed by the act of reading.[[90]](#endnote-90) On the following Sunday Ausonia went to the mass in Rio and felt repugnance at all the symbols she had previously admired, and so upon returning home, burned her images of saints.[[91]](#endnote-91) In nineteenth-century Brazil, missionary publishing played a role similar to that of Christian literacy among African converts: periodicals, spiritual autobiographies, and religious tracts enabled converts to refashion individual subjectivities by creating new reading habits, disciplining behaviour, interiorising evangelical doctrines, and fostering processes of religious change.[[92]](#endnote-92)

**Conclusion**

In July 1892, after twenty-eight years of constant circulation, the editors of *Imprensa Evangelica* announced the suspension of the periodical, a fact that reveals some of the limitations that Brazilian Protestant churches faced at that time.[[93]](#endnote-93) Financial problems of the Brazil Mission and conflicts of interests among Protestant missionaries brought the periodical to an end. Although it was in the interest of American and Brazilian missionaries to make the *Imprensa Evangelica* self-supporting, they were not able to expand the number of subscriptions throughout the nineteenth century as they planned, counting only eight-hundred in 1892.[[94]](#endnote-94) This was due both to the limited extension of evangelical growth in this period and to the high rates of illiteracy in Brazil. Furthermore, the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in the United States decided to waive financial support for the *Imprensa* as conflicts in the Brazil Mission began to escalate. Brazilian ministers and church elders of the São Paulo mission, gathered around the influential leadership of Eduardo C. Pereira, began to clash with a group of Northern American missionaries over the control of the São Paulo Presbyterian Church and the administration of the mission school.[[95]](#endnote-95)

Nevertheless, the *Imprensa Evangelica* played an important role in forging new religious identities in nineteenth-century Brazil and projecting a religious minority into the Brazilian public sphere. Exchanges and controversies held with Catholic and secular periodicals in this period generated a flow of information and doctrines centred around issues of religious freedom, secularisation, and church-state relations that asserted the presence of evangelical minorities in the public arena. Furthermore, Protestant-Catholic controversies in this period reinforced both nineteenth-century evangelical identities, which emerged in strong opposition to traditional Catholicism, and the Catholic Ultramontane revival, that portrayed the spread of Protestantism, Positivism, and republicanism in Brazil as major threats to the traditional social order and to the place of Catholicism in the Brazilian society.[[96]](#endnote-96) Besides being an instrument of evangelisation, the *Imprensa* also furnished Protestant converts individually, with doctrinal and catechetical material aimed to develop processes of religious change by interiorising evangelical creeds, and small congregations with liturgical and educational matter, such as hymns, sermons, catechisms, and reading primers.

1. Abbreviations: AHP=Arquivo Histórico Presbiteriano, São Paulo; *IE*=Imprensa Evangelica; PHS=Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.

   I am grateful to Joel Cabrita, Joseph Florez, Eric Miller, Emma Wild-Wood, and to the JEH anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions. Research for this article was funded by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – CAPES, the Cambridge Commonwealth, European and International Trust, and the Cambridge University Fieldwork Funding.

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