Reactions to the Pandemic in Latin America and Brazil: Are Religions Essential Services?

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Abstract

In Brazil, the Covid-19 pandemic is triggering tensions in health management that provoke, among others, a political crisis led by the federal government, characterized by negationist postures regarding the seriousness of the disease and lack of focus on public health policies. There is also an information crisis enabled by the political strategy of dissemination of disinformation that disqualifies scientific parameters and the role of the press. In this context, churches and Christian religious leaders who have risen to power in recent years play a fundamental role, which allows them to be analyzed from their performance as a public religion. By decreeing the closure of religious temples, as a preventive measure for the advance of the disease, evangelical-pentecostal churches insert into the public debate the defense of the essentiality of religious service as a fundamental dimension for society, conferring support and legitimacy to the action of the government. In this sense, this paper argues that the Brazilian scenario, when compared to other Latin American countries, is an outlier. Based on ethnographic research within online media and the religious media circuit, this paper maintains that, nationally, religion takes the lead in the political and information crisis. At the same time, this study affirms that, approaching other countries of the region, the churches reinvented mediatized religious practices, deriving from the social distancing and isolation, and offered new meanings and religious moralities around the health crisis.

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Introduction

Declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 13, 2020, Covid-19 had its first case confirmed in Brazil 16 days earlier. Almost 5 months later, on July 20, official figures show more than 80,000 deaths and a further 2.1 million people infected, with a rate of 38 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.1 This makes the country the second in absolute number of cases in the world, behind the USA alone, which has a death rate of 43 deaths/100,000 inhabitants. In Latin America, only Chile and Peru have higher mortality rates than Brazil: Chile, with 330,930 infected and 8503 dead, has a death rate of 45 deaths/100,000 inhabitants, and Peru, with 353,590 infected and 13,187 dead, has a death rate of 41 deaths/100,000 inhabitants.2 Besides the human tragedy, in Brazil, the pandemic creates tensions in the health sector that fuel, among others, the political and information crisis that plagues the country, in which religion appears as one of the protagonists.

The first crisis is caused by the federal government itself, starting with President Jair Messias Bolsonaro’s dismissive attitude, treating the seriousness of the disease lightly (at one point, even referring to Covid-19 as “just the sniffles”). In addition, the federal government has not focused on public health policies to be adopted and has not launched a federal campaign to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus. During the pandemic period, two health ministers were replaced for disagreeing with the president’s approach to preventing and treating the disease, accepting the economic pressures to relax social isolation, and encouraging the unproven use of hydroxychloroquine.3 At the legal level, there was the presidential veto on the mandatory wearing of masks in public places and the judicialization of state and municipal responsibility over the sanitary measures of isolation and social distancing. According to opinion polls (Rocha and Solano 2020:17), the lack of reliable public guidance produced an atmosphere of uncertainty and lack of credibility in public institutions and their spokespersons. The instability of social isolation measures has produced a dichotomy between complying with protection measures, viable only for the rich, and taking the risk of contamination, as a fate for the poor.

The other crisis, related to the first one, is the information one, caused by the spread of disinformation4 about the origin, treatment, and collective care of Covid-19. As a political strategy, the disinformation produced by the government itself and its supporters aimed at disqualifying the scientific parameters for the management of the virus, downplaying the informative role of the press, accusing the provision of data by the

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1 https://covid.saude.gov.br/. Accessed 20 Jul 2020.
2 https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirus-maps.html Accessed 20 Jul 2020.
3 On June 19, WHO definitively suspended the study on hydroxychloroquine for evaluating its ineffectiveness as a potential therapeutic agent. Nevertheless, on July 7, when tested positively for Covid-19, President Bolsonaro, like US President Donald Trump, declared that he was making preventive use of chloroquine, reinforcing once again his campaign for the drug; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j12YAAqww4. Accessed 8 Jul 2020.
4 Disinformation is understood as the intentional and massive production and dissemination of false or decontextualized information with the objective of achieving certain ends and deceiving the public, interfering in their right to access information, as advocated by international organizations for the defense of freedom of expression (Martins 2020).
major media of “hysteria”, encouraging anti-democratic protests and normalizing the use of hydroxychloroquine as preventive medicine. Its effectiveness reverberated in official media channels such as the president’s social networks and the public television broadcaster.\(^5\) Due to the government’s role in the information crisis, it was denounced to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights for systematically violating “the right to clear, precise and scientifically-based information on efficient actions, articulations, and public policies to combat Covid-19, which consequently affects and violates the rights to health and life” of the Brazilian population.\(^6\)

The political and information crisis reaches the religious sphere, in which the churches, with their divergent positions on the ways of managing the pandemic, are protagonists. This paper focuses on Christian churches, especially evangelical sectors,\(^7\) some publicly aligned with the government. Antagonistic positions are found among the churches and among the followers regarding the holding of services, opening and/or closing of temples, and adoption of restrictive measures. This reality is one more factor in the worsening of the health crisis, and, as this paper will discuss, this trend becomes an outlier when compared to other countries in Latin America.

It is noticeable that, faced with the sanitary imposition of the closure of religious temples as a measure of social distancing, the position adopted by some pastoral leaders, congressmen, and relevant personalities in the religious media has provoked a public controversy. As a result of these clashes, religious actors were forced to activate mediatic and judicial devices, and the unfolding of this strategy signals political and identity gains for the evangelical churches. It is worth remembering that, in recent decades, the evangelicals in Latin America, in general, and in Brazil, in particular, have become relevant political actors, either in the electoral processes or in the sphere of power (Camurça 2020; Carranza 2020; De la Torre 2020; Guadalupe 2019; Guerreiro 2020; Sales and Mariano 2019; Semán 2019). The protagonism was strengthened not only by their political activism but also and above all by adopting a political identity as a religious minority (Burity 2020), which was reinforced in the pandemic, as will be seen.

At the same time, the evangelical action in the pandemic has also revealed other dimensions of its participation as a public religion, understood as a qualified presence of religious actors in the social sphere, in which they are forced to constantly negotiate their traditional repertoire before other interlocutors, religious or not, who question their performance socially and theologically (Burity 2015; Camurça 2018, 2019; Casanova 1994; Montero 2018). This negotiation of the traditional repertoire can be observed when countless evangelical agencies launched themselves to give spiritual support to their followers by using technological innovations to offer online services, exponentially

\(^5\) https://www.aosfatos.org/noticias/tv-publica-federal-promove-drogas-sem-comprovacao-contra-covid-19-defendidasporalsonaro/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=news. Accessed 10 Jul 2020.

\(^6\) http://intervozes.org.br/governo-bolsonaro-e-denunciado-na-cidh-por-violacoes-dos-direitos-humanos-napandemia. Accessed 20 Jul 2020.

\(^7\) The complex nature of non-Catholic Christianity are simplified, both by the Brazilian popular sense and by the media, and people groups, churches, congregations, denominations, movements, and institutions are identified generically as evangelicals. However, this corpus is analytically heterogeneous, including several historical developments (Protestantism, Pentecostalism), typologies that describe them (Pentecostal and Neopentecostal), positions in the political spectrum (right, left), and ideological (conservative, progressive). Therefore, it is not possible to make any kind of generalization about them. In this text, the terms evangelical, Pentecostal, Neopentecostal, and Evangelical churches will be used, assuming the broad accumulated discussion about the density of each term and its analytical caution.
extending the use of the media they were already carrying out. Recreating symbolic structures, pastors offered support to manage fear, anxiety, and anguish in the face of imminent unemployment, the real threat of death by disease, and the unequal access to health services by the population. In this unprecedented health crisis, we can also see the relevance of the social role of the evangelical churches, that make their organizational expertise available by distributing humanitarian aid, especially in the slums and peripheries.

The hypothesis that guides this reflection is that the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil was, for the evangelical-pentecostal churches, a unique opportunity to act as a public religion by incorporating in the public debate the essentiality of religious service as a fundamental dimension for society. This service, during the first months of the pandemic in Brazil, tends to show three dimensions: the reinvention of religious practices, as a result of the self-isolation and the expansion of the use of the media, the elaboration of the new senses of religious experiences and morality, and the establishment of a public controversy surrounding the coronavirus.8

To carry out the research, we did ethnography of the online environment, a space that, for Miller and Horst (2015:12), is no less authentic and mediated than the “off-line” spaces, since websites and social networks are also spaces of social relations. To select the websites and social networks to the research, we adopted a multi-sited perspective through which, according to George Marcus, it is possible to identify, from multiple observation sites, a complex contextual architecture and the voices that produce it (Marcus 2015: 20–21; 1995). The spaces were defined based on the conflict that guides the hypothesis: the essentiality of religious service. This methodological solution was considered appropriate for pandemic times, times of total social experimentation, because it stimulates analytical intuitions while events are happening.9

Thus, several data sources were used. First, there was a survey and systematization of news about the performance of evangelicals and Catholics in the face of the pandemic in Brazilian and Latin American media outlets of major influence in the national debate in each country, according to the criteria of the Media Ownership Monitor (MOM).10 The second source was the religious media in Brazil: religious programs, especially evangelical ones, broadcasted on the country’s most popular TV stations on weekends. It should be noted that the huge amount of religious mass media outlets in Brazil singles it out from the other Latin American countries. The third source of data was the digital ethnography of websites and social network sites of churches and religious leaders. Churches and leaders were chosen based on the criteria of prominence in the public debate on the pandemic in matters of secular and religious media. Data were collected from February 25 to July 20, 2020.

The text is divided into four parts. In the first part, it seeks to show, as surveyed in relevant media in Latin American countries, how the evangelical churches have placed

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8 The authors are grateful to the Laboratory of Anthropology of Religion/UNICAMP for organizing two seminars in which such analytical dimensions were discussed with Brazilian and Latin American researchers. The complete materials are available at https://www.facebook.com/LARunicamp/. Accessed 20 Jul 2020.
9 We note that these times of social isolation and uncertainty also affect us personally and professionally, as researchers who need to reinvent forms of research, dialog, and writing processes to produce reflections on these changing times, and that we find our fears, stress, and stress in the subjects we research in a mirrored way.
10 MOM has mapped 50 media outlets or communication networks with the largest audience in four segments: 11 TV networks (open and pay TV), 12 radio networks, 17 print media outlets, and ten online media outlets (general interest news portals) in Brazil and other Latin American countries. http://brazil.mom-rsf.org/br/midia/. Accessed 29 Jun 2020.
themselves as important allies of governments in facing the pandemic, as a device for increasing the adherence to preventive measures and as a support for the dissemination of these measures. The second part offers evidence to infer that, in Latin America, the management of the Covid-19 sanitary crisis has made Brazil an outlier: the essentiality of religious service has become a public demand. In the third part, we tried to show how churches seek to remain relevant to their followers through the use of the media and the religious responses they present regarding of the pandemic. Lastly, the final considerations are presented.

The Latin American Evangelical Churches: Public Debate and Religious Mediatization

The Covid-19 pandemic hit every country of the Latin American continent, forcing governments to implement policies against its dissemination, directly affecting one of the pillars of Christianity: the gathering of the followers in the temple. Thus, pastoral leaders and religious actors were forced to create new ways to remain in contact with the followers and to develop management strategies and etiological narratives about the pandemic. Because of the suspicion that Brazil would be an outlier in the trend of religious management of the pandemic, we compared the performance of Brazilian evangelical churches with those of other countries in Latin America.11

The questions that guided this descriptive study, under non-probabilistic digital sampling, were: Do the evangelical churches have a relevant role in the public debate about the fight against Covid-19? Did they support social initiatives along with local governments? In the cases in which there was an alignment with the WHO, what were the strategies for holding services and serving the public?

Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Argentina were the first selected countries. According to the Pew Research Center criteria (2014), all of them have a self-defined Catholic majority, above 70% of the population. To better understand possible contrasts in this religious composition, the scope of the inquiry was broadened to countries with an equivalent proportion of evangelicals and Catholics, including Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador. In turn, all of these have had a decrease of more than 40% in the number of Catholics in the last 40 years. Finally, from Central America, Costa Rica, characterized by its high evangelical growth in recent years, and Panama, with a Catholic majority and a slight evangelical increase, were included.12

11 The authors are grateful for Mariana Pfister, who helped in the data collection phase in Latin American media, as well in the elaboration of the data base and tables of contents.
12 The descriptors were used for data collection in secular media: iglesias evangélicas, iglesias cristianas, creyentes, and for the religious media the references that these media made to them were triggered in an intertextual way. The summary table that integrates the data base contains 177 news classified in secular media outlets like this: Argentina 31 news (Clarín, La Nación, Página 12, Tiempo Argentino, Perfil, Vía País); Colômbia - 12 news El Tiempo, El País, El Espectador, Extra, Publimetro, El Popular); México 12 news (Aristegui Noticias, El Universal, Excelsior, Proceso, La Republica); Peru — 13 news (Extra, Excelsior, Correo, El comercio, El popular, La república, Perú 21, Trome); na América Central 15 news (Prensa Libre, La Nación, Panamá América, El País, El Libertador, El Nuevo diario, El Mundo, CBN/mundo cristiano, 19 Digital). In the religious media, priority was given to those with the greatest regional coverage among them: Evangélico Digital, ACIERA (Alianza de las Iglesias Cristianas) AEL (Alianza Evangélica Latina), Evangélico Digital (Centro América), Mundo Cristiano Internacional, CONFRATERNICE (Confraternidade Nacional de Iglesias Cristianas Evangélicas).
With this arsenal of information, it is possible to trace some trends on the role of the evangelical churches in public debate, the types of adherence to the government authorities, the social actions promoted, and the strategies for holding services and attending the public. On the role of the churches in the public debate, the first point that draws attention is that in most of the statements of secular news from traditional media about religious activities and/or churches, the emphasis is on the Catholic Church (masses, priests, Lent, Holy Week). The research found little news about actions taken by evangelicals during the pandemic. When there was some kind of evangelical allusion, the information highlighted the disrespect to sanitary measures by pastors and believers or the permanence of tithing. Examples such as the Peruvian pastor arrested for gathering followers to pray for immunity against the coronavirus are frequent in other countries. In Mexico, it was noted that the president of Confraternice (Confraternidad Nacional de Iglesias Cristianas Evangélicas) refused to suspend the services because there were no legal reasons not to hold them. Again, in Peru, a governor and a group of evangelicals from the Amazon region have been accused of providing unproven medicine to indigenous people. However, this kind of positioning has proved to be rare when compared with what was seen in Brazil.

Adherence to government measures of self-isolation and social distancing is the predominant tonic in the region, showing a double-handed search for legitimacy. On the one hand, the churches present themselves publicly to collaborate with the state and the society, with the consequent gains in visibility. Thus, pastoral leaders become an extensive voice of prevention policies, assuming a pedagogical character before their followers, as a Nicaraguan pastor said: “We are not doctors, but we guide our followers to comply with the recommendations of the Ministry of Health to protect themselves from evil.” In El Salvador, pastors make the temple and the school infrastructure available to public bodies. In Peru, UNICEP (Unión de Iglesias Evangélicas del Perú) has provided a team of volunteers who work along with the Ministry of Health to support hospitals. In Costa Rica and Honduras, churches have distributed sanitary supplies to public hospitals. In Argentina, pastoralists have placed food resources at the service of the government, while in Colombia 30 leaders reiterated their support for the dissemination of preventive protocols for disease control. Besides that, assistance actions were carried out by the churches’ own infrastructure, which, by providing food,
shelter for homeless people, and preventive security items (masks, alcohol gel), became a wall to contain the effects of the pandemic thanks to its consolidated structures.

On the other hand, in order to implement coercive measures to maintain the closure of public establishments, including temples, and punitive measures to restrain agglomerations, governments are calling for support from evangelical churches. In Guatemala, the president of the republic has called on the evangelical churches, among other social sectors, to join the Council of State. In Argentina, the Minister of Development has organized an emergency committee in which ACIERA (Alianza de las Iglesias Evangélicas de la República Argentina) has a seat and, in Panama, the evangelical churches were considered a bridge between the Health Ministry and the evangelical public to reverberate the information and guidelines emanating from the government agency.

Researching the territorialization of the evangelical churches and the pandemic in Buenos Aires, Mariela Mosqueira said that the pastor’s voice is a reference, especially in low-income sectors, because it decodes the scientific and technical knowledge of government agencies. He will be a leader with great moral effect and credibility before the community because he knows the daily dramas of their survival. That is why, in times of crisis, the State always resorts to the religious sectors, because, since they are considered authorities by the religious environment and because of their broad capacity to reach where the State cannot, they can be a sounding board for government provisions.

The tracking of religious websites makes it possible not only to understand the public presence of the evangelicals but also to capture the experience of religious mediatization during the pandemic. It can be seen then that, in religious websites and social networks, there is a scope of information ranging from basic hygiene guidelines for the prevention of Covid-19 infection to the regulation of conjugality and the strengthening of family ties in times of quarantine. In the words of Central American evangelical leaders: “We suggest taking a time for clamor, intercession, and vigil, in which families are united, without leaving their homes, as the authorities ask, but they can read the Word, anoint their houses, their children (...), forgive each other ….” Thus, the family space can become a domestic church, where the worship rituals performed in the temple are recreated and religious morals are re-established.

In the same direction, the offering of religious services on church websites leads to the use of digital networks. In order to provide access to worship, religious services, information, and support structures, the followers are instructed to learn and/or intensify their use of meeting, content, and message exchange platforms such as Zoom,
Facebook, Youtube, Instagram, and WhatsApp. An Argentinean evangelical church exemplifies this digital slide very well. On Sunday, the pastor sends a trumpet sound through WhatsApp to alert that the service will begin, while a channel on Youtube performs activities with puppets for children. During the week, the channel airs 12 h a day, reflections, gym and cooking classes, Bible studies, and messages for teenagers. The maintenance of the channel involves the church followers themselves, who not only utilize the services but also involve themselves in the making of the proposals.\(^{27}\)

There are also other forms of dissemination of religious content through chats, lives, streamings, podcasts that strengthen the platforms for sharing, and religious learning as practices and experiences in pandemic times. Some churches take better advantage of digital technologies, especially those that already used these strategies before the pandemic. Analyzing the evangelical MasVida church in Mexico, Cristina Zuñiga suggests that the new technological interaction supports are not complementary to physical spaces but build spaces of experience by allowing the creation of a multi-sited community that interacts virtually from multiple platforms. Thus, this interaction, in its multi-centered form, modifies the bonds with authority and its access to tradition, guided by the logic of media consumption and cultural goods.\(^{28}\)

According to the available data, it is possible to ascertain that for a large part of the evangelical churches in the region taking care of the pandemic is a State issue. Therefore, adhering to the health policies promulgated by it is a citizen obligation to protect their own society. However, it is possible to see the political gains yield by this discursive alignment to governments, by placing themselves as important agents — or even essential agents — in facing the pandemic, especially because, due to their capillary structure, the management of the media outlets and their voice of authority, they achieve where the State does not.

The political gain of the churches is presented sometimes in the form of public visibility, through their assistance and the resources and infrastructure they make available, and sometimes in the consolidation of their leadership before the most vulnerable sectors in which they have a wide penetration. On the State side, having the evangelical sectors as allies gives legitimacy to their policies, as well as multiplies the number of the pedagogical working at the pandemic control. Even so, there are cases in which, by theological interpretations or idiosyncrasies, some evangelical leaders resist in adhering to the measures of social distancing or assume dismissive postures before the coronavirus. However, everything indicates that these are isolated cases, not constituting a trend.

Therefore, based on the survey carried out so far, it can be said that, in most Latin American countries, governments and evangelical segments have aligned themselves with WHO’s criteria for the management of the pandemic and recognize its severity. Brazil, however, is moving to another direction: in the midst of public controversies, evangelical authorities and leaders of great projection in the media are building narratives that aim to expand their political power by building the legitimacy of religious service as

\(^{27}\) https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/un-like-amen-coronavirus-ministros-religiosos-recurren-nid2348628. Accessed 8 Jun 2020.

\(^{28}\) Presentation at the International Seminar Religious Reactions to Covid-19, organized by the Laboratory of Anthropology of Religion /UNICAMP, from June 30 to July 2, 2020, presentation in full: https://www.facebook.com/LARunicamp/videos/767626430643963
essential to society. This is one of the elements that put Brazil as an exception, as it will be discussed below.

**Essentiality of Religion in Times of Pandemic: Public Controversy**

On March 20, the Brazilian federal government published the decree no. 10.282/2020,\(^{29}\) that determined which were the public services and the essential activities that could function. They were defined as “those indispensable to meet the unavoidable needs of the community, thus considered those that, if not met, endanger the survival, health or safety of the population”. Five days later, a new decree (no. 10.292/2020)\(^{30}\) added “religious activities of any nature, obeyed the determinations of the Ministry of Health,” among others, to the list of essential services. Keeping the temples closed or making their opening more flexible became a public controversy, which exposed differences within the federal government itself, between the federal government and state and municipal governments, as well as among religious segments. In some cases, the judiciary had to intervene to regulate the object of the controversy.\(^{31}\)

Congress members and religious leaders have put pressure on the government to recognize religious activities as an essential service. On March 18, the FPE — Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the National Congress, issued a note calling for the reopening of the temples.\(^{32}\) Evangelical leaders who have great visibility in the media also put intense pressure for the reopening of the temples. Although some of them took an initial attitude of denying or minimizing the virus, following the President’s speech, the arguments used focused mainly on defending the nature of religious activity as essential in times of social and health crisis. The religious leaders who advocated this view also corroborated the argument that fighting the new coronavirus should not affect the economy, since an economic crisis could be an equal or even greater harm. Despite its political character, the construction of the essentiality of religious service in times of pandemic has been anchored in two dimensions: the spiritual, expressed in media events that present the pandemic as a religious issue and not only a public health issue and legitimize the actions of the Bolsonaro government, and the social, expressed in the defense of the religious temple as a spiritual refuge and a welfare support to the population in times of social crisis.

The understanding that the pandemic has an intrinsic spiritual dimension leads to the conclusion that the country needs spiritual actions to fight the disease. This concept is based on the idea of spiritual battle — a Pentecostal vision based on the duality between good and evil and the belief in the manifestation of spiritual forces in the material world, exposed to evil spiritual forces that have to be fought (Almeida 2003; Mariz 1999). Spiritual warfare is part of the prosperity theology — which proposes the enjoyment of earthly goods for the happiness of the children of God — and of the

\(^{29}\) [http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2019-2022/2020/decreto/D10282.htm](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2019-2022/2020/decreto/D10282.htm). Accessed 25 Mar 2020.

\(^{30}\) [http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2019-2022/2020/decreto/D10292.htm#art1](http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2019-2022/2020/decreto/D10292.htm#art1). Accessed 25 Mar 2020.

\(^{31}\) List of prohibitions of states that reach religious meetings [https://www.nexojornal.com.br/expresso/2020/03/20/A-disputa-sobre-os-cultos-evang%C3%A9licos-na-pandemia](https://www.nexojornal.com.br/expresso/2020/03/20/A-disputa-sobre-os-cultos-evang%C3%A9licos-na-pandemia). Accessed 18 Jun 2020.

\(^{32}\) [https://saude.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,bancada-evangelica-pede-reabertura-de-templos-para-enfrentar-pandemia-maligna,70003238598](https://saude.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,bancada-evangelica-pede-reabertura-de-templos-para-enfrentar-pandemia-maligna,70003238598). Accessed 18 Jun 2020.
dominion theology — a biblical interpretation that advocates the construction of political power and the religious domination over the different dimensions of social life (Guadalupe 2019). Both are widespread among evangelicals of different denominations in Brazil (Bandeira 2017).

It is not surprising, therefore, that the FPE’s note defines Covid-19 as an “evil pandemic” against which prayers would be required. Therefore, in the months that followed, the spiritual battle against the pandemic was performed in several events that brought together Christian religious leaders and the president Bolsonaro. The idea of the performative character of events is proposed by Peiriano (2002) and Tambiah (1985). Characterizing events of various kinds from the notion of rituals, the authors present them as collective performances aimed at achieving certain ends. Thus, these events not only represent existing alliances, social positions, and discourses but also dispute and contribute to produce new alliances, positions, and discourses.

Even in the pandemic scenario, some of the religious events convened by the religious leaders and the president Bolsonaro took place in person, ritualized in public space. Others took place in online meetings, but all of them were widely publicized on the organizer’s social networks (Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter) and some were even retransmitted on TV Brasil, the public television station. At the same time, such events received harsh criticism from the traditional mass media, and this negative news reinforced the Bolsonaro’s and his supporters’ claim of the existence of a “press that decided to be a political party in name of shady interests.”

The first religious event, of great performativity, was held in early April. A video distributed on the social networks called the “army of Christ” for a day of fasting and prayer. Besides Bolsonaro, 36 evangelical leaders, most pastors of Pentecostal, Neopentecostal, and to a lesser extent, renewed historical and historical churches, emphasized “the holy proclamation made by the supreme head of the nation” on the day of “national fasting” “for Brazil,” “for the nation,” “for the homeland,” “for the people.” The new coronavirus pandemic — a situation presented as worldwide, but with a spiritual battle located in Brazil — is cited as the target situation in the speeches of some of them: fasting, prayer, and clamor would be the weapons towards “victory” the evil and the wickedness.

The second performance event was held in the following week. The TV Brasil programming was interrupted during a little more than 2 h (4 pm to 6 pm) by the “Easter video conference,” called by the president and the first lady Michelle Bolsonaro. The event was attended by 21 Christian religious leaders, 17 of whom were Evangelicals (mostly pastors, but also some singers), and three Catholics (a bishop, a singing priest, and a singer), as well as a rabbi. The “live” was hosted by

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33 Federal Law 11.652/2008, which created the Empresa Brasil de Comunicação, prohibits “any form of proselytism in the programming of public broadcasters” (paragraph 1, article 3) and also establishes that there should be no religious, partisan, philosophical, ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation discrimination on public TV (Article 2). However, since he assumed the presidency, Bolsonaro has used public broadcasters for personal promotion and political and religious proselytism, which hurts the public character of the public broadcasters and the Brazilian legislation.

34 https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=2616329938692876&ref=watch_permalink Accessed 20 Jul 2020.

35 Called for Palm Sunday, which commemorates, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Jesus entrance into Jerusalem. The complete event is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MV7vR1ZX19Q. Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
an evangelical businesswoman, the wife of one of the greatest Brazilian media businessmen, owner of the Brazilian Television System (SBT), which supported the election of Bolsonaro and is part of the media circuit that produces positive coverage on the government.

As a political-religious performance, the videoconference evoked, among others thems, the dispute over the construction of Brazilian identity as a Christian nation — and no longer as a Catholic nation, a vision consolidated throughout the country’s history —, and the political and religious strengthening of certain conservative leaders as representatives of a religious field, albeit its actual heterogeneity. The analysis of the construction of the idea of a Christian nation and the strengthening of the conservative political and pastoral elites are beyond the scope of this text. However, it is worth highlighting how religious leaders used the space to “pray”, pleading with God for protection, and to “prophesy” over the nation, addressing their words, songs, and the gestures that accompany them (hands flattened towards the video cameras) both to the president and the Brazilian authorities and to the audience. Gestures and imagery reinforce the idea of a prophetic mission to be carried out by religious and political authorities, as well as by the President, who also carries in his own name the title of Messias (Messiah); Jair Messias Bolsonaro.

In the Evangelicals and Catholics speeches, we can identify three common elements. First, the spiritual ethymology of the pandemic, either as Devil’s work as a reaction to the growing number of evangelicals in Brazil or as part of God’s purposes. Secondly, the importance of religious actions, such as prayers, to face the pandemic, among other “enemies” that devastate the nation. Finally, the message of faith and hope that states that Brazil will be a better country at the end of the pandemic. During the more than 2 h of the video conference, only two leaders mentioned social isolation or other public health actions as measures to control the pandemic. The prayers were mainly addressed to the authorities and to the “Brazilian family,” understood as the traditional heteronormative family, and few prayers or messages of solidarity mentioned the victims of Covid-19 and the health agents who are in the front line.

According to these religious leaders, the trust in the government’s to management of the health crisis is anchored not in actions, but in the idea that the president would have been chosen or “authorized” by God to command Brazil. In the dramatic narrative built by some pastors and repeated by Bolsonaro at the end of the videoconference, the president have survived the stab he suffered during the election campaign and was elected by a “miracle” from God. The Catholic singer said that he was chosen by God because “a country that is declared of the Lord Jesus is born to win,” a reference to the president’s public declarations that his government would be supported by God. This idea updates the campaign and government slogan, widely repeated by allied religious leaders: “Brazil above all, God above everyone.” Consequently, “evil is falling by itself.”

Apparently, none of the participants doubt that faith guarantees that the country will come out of the crisis “even stronger,” “stronger, more supportive and fraternal,” and will live “a good future,” “peaceful and quiet days,” “a new time,” “a time of prosperity that has never happened in our history.” One of the speakers said that “Brazil will be the greatest nation in the world, economically speaking, we will send missionaries all over the world to declare that Jesus is alive, Jesus is alive and is the Lord of the [Brazilian] nation.
One pastor, who is also a federal congressman, said that the results of religious actions were already visible:

Last week the whole of Brazil stopped for a time of fasting, of prayer, and all this moved the heavens of Brazil. In these last five days, we have seen radical changes happen. I couldn't help saying this here. Suddenly, the extreme press and other people who were against the medication [hydroxychloroquine] that the president was indicating are now buckling and suddenly we begin to feel that the medicine (...) is beginning to take effect and people will be healed.36

He reinforced the propaganda of the controversial use of the hydroxochloroquine made by the president and his allies, following the example of Donald Trump, in opposition to WHO recommendations. However, the facts do not match with the declarations of the pastoral and congress leadership, since in one week the number of dead and infected in Brazil more than doubled, from 487 to 1230 and from 11,281 to 22,318, respectively. These performances, therefore, also contribute to the informative disorder that plagues Brazil.

After this, the power of spiritual actions in support to the Bolsonaro government continued to be performatized and massively disseminated through social networks. On June 5, the “Prayer for Brazil with the presence of President Bolsonaro and evangelical leaders,” brought together 11 pastors during about 30 min in the outer area of the Palácio do Planalto, the presidential office in Brasília (DF). The act was broadcast live on social networks by the president and the pastor who organized the event.37 The leaders defined it as a prophetic religious event with the objective of praying for the president, the National Congress, the Federal Superior Court (STF), as representative of the highest power of the justice system, the Brazilian people and the Brazilian government. Although there were more than 35 thousand deaths and more than 600 thousand infected then, the evangelical leaders and the president did not wear masks to protect against the Covid-19 and repeated ideas said in the Easter video conference: the belittlement of the severity of the pandemic, the ritualization of Bolsonaro as God’s chosen one to guide the nation, and the narrative construction of Brazil as a Christian nation that would live the best moment in its history after the pandemic.

It is worth noting that this religious event took place in the midst of a crisis of governance in which six cases have been filed with the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE) to revoke the mandate of Mr. Bolsonaro and his vice-president, Hamilton Mourão. There are also more than 30 impeachment requests of the president in the National Congress and an investigation of a criminal network that shares disinformation and attacks on STF ministers. At the same time, the STF is urgently examining issues of interest to churches and conservative sectors such as abortion and the so-called “gender ideology.”38

Therefore, the performativity of the events convened by the religious leaders allied to the bolsonarismo emphasized the spiritual power — materialized in them as leaders

36 https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=2616329938692876&ref=watch_permalink. Accessed 20 Jul 2020.
37 https://www.facebook.com/SilasMalafaia/videos/1939183372878431. Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
38 Genealogy of the legal proceedings can be found here https://apublica.org/impeachment-bolsonaro/. Accessed 18 Jul 2020.
or “prophetic voices” and in the power conferred to the president of the Republic as someone chosen by God — as a way to fight the pandemic and lead Brazil to a time of prosperity. Thus, the political-religious performativity of these public events contributes to the normalization of the essentiality of religious services. 39

The second dimension, according to the analysis, that contributes to the construction of the narrative of the essentiality of religious services is the spiritual and social functionality of the temples. Therefore, when religious leaders refuse to close the temples, a controversy arises between religious sectors and health authorities. The former argue that the physical spaces of the temples are essential to provide spiritual and welfare support to the population in times of social, economic, and public health crisis. The others appeal to coercive measures that restrain agglomerations. The controversy occurs even among the followers, pastoral leaders, and churches, divided between avoiding the infection risks and the emerging need for support.

The question was raised as a controversy to be regulated since the beginning of the pandemic, when the FPE advocated the flexibilization of the temple closures, using as argument the essentiality of religion based on spiritual support:

> We know that the Church is a place of refuge for many who find themselves frightened and desperate. Faith helps to overcome anxieties and is a factor of psycho-emotional balance. This is why, at a time of so much affliction, it is fundamental that the temples, with the necessary preventive measures in place, open to receive those who are downcast and to welcome those who are desperate (...). We believe that faith is a great ally in this serious moment of the nation, therefore we cannot limit it. 40

This justification would be endorsed by Jair Bolsonaro in a popular free-to-air TV show, when he compared the pandemic to a “passing rain” and defended the opening of churches because they would be “the last refuge of the people,” 41 The speech was repeated by religious leaders on social networks and in their radio and TV shows. Some have defined the church as a “spiritual and emotional hospital,” 42 claiming that his arguments were based on science: “Fear and panic weaken immunity, make room for the virus to settle in the body and increase the severity of the disease, while faith and hope increase the body’s immunity.” 43 Furthermore, according to these leaders, faith is effective against “fear,” “panic,” “anguish,” and “depression”, which increase in times of crisis and can lead to suicide. 44

In other cases, statements are articulated by taking out of context, or in a simplified manner, citations from researchers from recognized institutions and from scientific studies, to stress the importance of temples as allies of public health. They also highlight the health care provided by the churches, such as distance between people,

39 At the same time, they undermine the health protection policies suggested by health authorities and experts and corroborate the political support against the judicial challenge to government legitimacy.
40 https://saude.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,bancada-evangelica-pede-reabertura-de-templos-para-enfrentar-pandemia-maligna,70003238598. Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
41 Ratinho’s Program, SBT TV, March 20th. https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/bolsonaro-reclama-de-fechamento-de-igrejas-providencias-absurdas/ Accessed 20 Mar 2020.
42 https://www.advec.org/. Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
43 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvvvtnpAsrg. Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
44 https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=BlSwPvSgz-k&feature=emb_logo. Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
alcohol gel, and the sanitization of spaces. These arguments show that the leaders do not deny the existence of the virus or the effectiveness of science in fighting the pandemic but construct another type of denialism, claiming that some WHO guidelines and guidelines from national universities and research institutes are questionable, if not disqualified.

Furthermore, the churches are described not only as a place for spiritual assistance but also as an important institution to provide social assistance, fulfilling a function that governments would not be able to do. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) - one of the largest evangelical denominations in Brazil, present in other countries of Latin America, and with a strong presence in some of the largest Brazilian TV networks - uses to highlight the social works in its shows. UCKG’s TV shows emphasize the donation of *cestas básicas* (basic food baskets) for unemployed families or families in misery, and the aid for homeless people and prisoners. They also features partnerships with health institutes to provide physical space to host blood donations, as well as volunteers. In doing so, they do not place themselves as allies of the State, but as substitutes for it, claiming that, if they depended on the states and the municipalities, “those affected by the economic crisis caused by the pandemic would be ‘lost’, but they would survive ‘thanks’ to Universal and to the people who are donating for Universal’s bank accounts and donating baskets to the churches.”

While congress and pastoral leaders build the narrative of the essentiality of religious services by defending open temples and giving visibility to their social works, they re-signify the religious experience and try to present to their followers religious responses from multiple media platforms, as discussed below.

**Midiatized Religious Experiences: Responses to the Pandemic**

While they were pressuring authorities to keep temples open based on the idea of the essentiality of religion, religious leaders also were providing technological alternatives for the followers to enjoy the faith, religious responses to the pandemic, and stimuli for maintaining links between the congregation and the church (as a religion and as an institution). Thus, if the church can be in the house of every member of the Christian community, and if the Word can reach them through multiple channels (websites, social networks, messaging and videoconferencing services, radio and TV programs, and call centers), the followers cannot forget, on one hand, their faith - which would be the way to live through the pandemic by dispelling fear, waiting for a time of prosperity to be enjoyed after the pandemic. On the other hand, they cannot forget their bond with the institution, which needs the followers and their financial support for its existence and the consequent realization of spiritual and social works. In this section, it is discussed how churches use the media to maintain the ties with the followers and how the religious discourse on the pandemic is articulated.

To understand the use of media by the Brazilian evangelical churches in the pandemic period, it is necessary to stress that the religious media in Brazil is not something...
new. The first Catholic and evangelical radio stations were established in the 1940s. In the 1960s, the first Catholic TV stations emerged under the influence of Vatican Council II (Della Cava and Montero 1991), as well as the first evangelical TV shows. During the period of the Military Dictatorship (1964–1985), the number of religious radios increased. The so-called televangelism spread in Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s from the work of North American ministers and soon after of Brazilian pastors of different denominations (Assmann 1986), some of whom remain to this day as evangelical leaders with much space in the media. In the 1980s and 1990s, the evangelical and catholic churches expanded their communication strategies to dispute the concessions of TV stations.

At the beginning of this century, churches have also strengthened their presence in digital media, with the creation of websites and web portals, the use of social networks sites, the creation of applications for smartphones, and the investment in record labels and the career of gospel music singers. As a result, there is in Brazil a consolidated religious media circuit. Often analyzed as a marketing or evangelization strategy (Braga 2004; Campos 1997; Cunha 2007; Carranza 2011; Dolghie 2004), the religious media circuit also produces new forms of religious living, which complement and expand the experiences offered in churches and other physical spaces for religious activities.

With the beginning of the pandemic and the church closures, and later the permission to reopen temples with a limited audience, there was an intensification of a practice that already existed, especially in churches and denominations with larger numbers of believers and financial resources. A greater number of churches began to broadcast their services on the internet, live, and to carry out remote activities, such as Bible schools, youth meetings, women’s meetings, among others. There has also been an increase in the number of “lives”, carried out by pastors and singers, many of them accompanied by fundraising campaigns for social and religious assistance works conducted by the churches and ministries themselves or by partner entities, religious or not. In transmissions, it became common to use hashtags such as #fiqueemcasa (#stayathome) and #ore/cante/louvecomigo (#pray/sing/praisewithme), even by pastors who pressured the authorities to reopen the temples. And some events had their focus adjusted to the present context, such as the debate “Post-Pandemic Missionary Work”, that took place in an international mission congress.

However, the maintenance of bonds can pose a series of challenges, starting with the mediatized religious experience itself, which was being built as a complement, not a substitute to the face-to-face experience and its performative and sociability meanings. One of the ways found to encourage the maintenance of these bonds, in addition to the massive activities mentioned, was offering or expanding individualized remote service channels, such as telephone gates, so that the believers can get advice and pray with pastors and obreiros (church workers), and the scheduling of attendance through video calls.

Another challenge is the rite of admittance and religious conversion, since it used to occur at the end of the services, when possible new members of the community go to the altar to

48 https://www.itaucultural.org.br/secoes/observatorio-itau-cultural/doutora-antropologia-olivia-bandeira-comenta-producao Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
49 https://www.instagram.com/p/B_8faampVR0/ Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
50 https://www.instagram.com/p/CBo2aJDpoCw/ Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
say they have “accepted Jesus.” In normal times, even people who “feel touched” through TV programs aired with the purpose of evangelization are encouraged to seek the nearest temple to participate in the ritual of conversion. When the face-to-face meeting became impossible or difficult, however, new strategies had to be implemented. A renewed Baptist church launched the hashtag #EuDecidoPorJesusIBL (#IChoseJesusIBL) on social networks sites, encouraging the audience to post the message on the networks after the services: “if you wish to receive Jesus into your life or be reconciled with Him! The consolidation team of our church will contact you directly.” Another renewed Baptist church provides a QR code for potential new members to access the church application and send the message “I want a new life with God.”

Some churches, however, have more success in migrating their practices to the online environment, as Cristina Zuñiga also noted. Churches like the UCKG, which have a more diverse clientele, probably with a larger portion of believers who have difficulty accessing the Internet, have continued to encourage people to go to the nearest temple after being touched by a radio or TV show.51

Other ways to stimulate community bonds are calls for collective prayer, active search for new members (evangelization), and social assistance. Several churches have announced in their social networks and online services fasting and “uninterrupted prayers” campaigns to be held for a specific period of time. One of them directed the focus of the prayers to “the professional activity and preservation of jobs,” “freeing of the servants’ health (especially regarding the Coronavirus pandemic — Covid-19),” “homeland,” “Federal, State and Municipal Government,” and “security of the homes of the church servants,” among others.52 Another summoned its believers to “a cry in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic chaos for 40 DAYS OF FASTING AND PRAYER in the certainty that the answer will come from the heavens,” addressed to “the retreat of Covid-19; for the sick and the families of the victims; for the health agents; for the authorities; for the awakening and the unity of the church.”53

The call to evangelization through the media, on the other hand, updates the practice of evangelistic religions that poses that each member of the flock has the duty to win new believers through invitations and testimonies. Jehovah’s Witnesses, known for their door-to-door evangelization and their crowd preaching, have begun to send messages to random numbers of WhatsApp.54 A renewed Baptist church has prepared tips for “online evangelization”:

Pray for your friends and family, call them or have a video conference; bless someone’s day, send a text message with excerpts from the scriptures; stay connected, people in quarantine are more connected, make group “lives”, and video calls with your cell or disciples and preach the gospel; talk about your life...

51 Monitoring carried out by the authors in religious TV programs, as mentioned in the introduction.
52 http://www.maranata-sp.org.br/circular-061-20-motivos-de-oracao-interrupta-atualizacao/?fbclid=IwAR0enMnFUPsDg_pi7rfNhvH4OuuOLmnBQz8xza_4yqfDRHC4sr160dzm8 Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
53 https://www.facebook.com/Ibatitude/posts/4189098347770838 Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
54 https://tab.uol.com.br/noticias/redacao/2020/05/06/internet-substitui-evangelizacao-de-porta-em-porta-dastestemunhas-de-jeova.htm Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
testimony, tell how Jesus changed your life on IGTV, so people will spend more
time watching, commenting and tagging friends. 55

Finally, social work also generates bonds, not only for those who receive the
assistance but also for those who engage in the social works. Through the slogan
“in times of scarcity we need to be more generous,” the aforementioned Baptist
church encouraged its followers to donate to the “Love Prevails” campaign, which
already existed before the pandemic but, according to the church’s Facebook page,
increased the distribution of food to families. 56 This church also incites the
adhesion to the “network of mutual help to entrepreneurs,” with the objective of
spreading, in the church’s digital channels, the products and services offered by its
members. 57 UCKG’s television shows exhibit not only stories of the people who
received donations but also of those who made them. In this way, the flock’s
bonds, as a religious community, are fostered by the efforts for the development of
spiritual and social works as a way to confront the pandemic.

However, not all experiences have been mediatized. The Holy Supper, for instance,
a periodic ceremony in which church members share bread and grape juice, symbol-
izing wine, needed adaptations that were not always accepted by traditional churches.
At a Holy Supper held through Youtube, in order to adjust the ritual to the pandemic:
after presenting the bread and the wine (grape juice), the pastor said that those without
juice at home could replace it with water. “And if anyone is sick, when he takes the cup
and eats the bread let him be healed, amen,” said the minister before calling for praise
and instructing the people at home to first eat the bread and then take the juice/water. 58

The greatest difficulty was adapting the baptism ceremony that, in the evangelical
churches, consolidates conversion and community adherence. Although it is not a
common practice, some churches have also adapted the ritual of baptism to the
computer screen. Thus baptism by immersion (diving in a pool of water) was replaced
by baptism through the Zoom platform: on one side of the screen, the pastor throws
water towards the image on the faithful; on the other side, the believer pours a bucket of
water over his head. 59 Others kept the presential baptism, like the UCKG, though it
changed the immersion baptism for the aspersion baptism to follow the norms of the
Health Ministry. The phrase “the doors of the temple are open to those who want to
pray because the altar is not quarantined” has been repeated frequently on church TV
shows. 60

Another interesting aspect is that the churches have placed themselves as a source of
information about the pandemic, taking advantage of the already mentioned informa-
tion disorder. The TV programs, websites, and social networks of the churches began to
broadcast news about the pandemic, with two main focuses: preventive measures to the

55 https://www.facebook.com/Ibatitude/posts/4227479253932747 Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
56 https://www.facebook.com/Ibatitude/photos/a.324058054274906/4232343220113017/?type=3 Accessed
15 Jul 2020.
57 https://www.facebook.com/Ibatitude/photos/a.324058054274906/4239985496015456/?type=3&theater Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
58 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MCOo5FNt14&t=2864s Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
59 https://noticias.uol.com.br/saude/ultimas-noticias/redacao/2020/04/06/coronavirus-faz-igreja-que-casou-
eduardo-bolsonaro-realizar-batismos-online.htm
60 Monitoring carried out by the authors in religious TV programs, as mentioned in the introduction.
coronavirus\textsuperscript{61} and positive news, emphasizing above all the number of people who have been healed and advances in science in terms of diagnosis and treatment,\textsuperscript{62} at the same time criticizing the traditional media, which would emphasize the number of infected and dead people (Bandeira and Mendes 2020). The news focus on these two aspects was not exclusive: some churches were accused of spreading misinformation about Covid-19 and promoting miraculous solutions to the disease. In response, a group of organizations, professionals, researchers, and communication students with Christian backgrounds founded a project that aims to check the veracity of facts published daily in religious media and in social media that convey content about religions and their leaders in Brazil and abroad.\textsuperscript{63}

Maintaining bond has other challenges besides adapting ritual practices to the online environment. It is also necessary to consider that the religiosity that comes through the multiple media and internet channels not only brings the message of a denomination but also opens a range of possibilities for religious experience. It places different churches and religious agents in the same market of goods of salvation, as Cristina Zuñiga observed in Mexico.

The variety mediatized religious experiences and salvation goods available through the media broadens the competition among denominations and favors those with bigger financial capacity and media ownership, and better mastery of technological tools. Another challenge relates to media consumption practices themselves and the different forms of access to them in Brazil. Broadband internet, for example, is still a reality for few in the country,\textsuperscript{64} and that favors religious denominations that are present on multiple platforms, such as radio and TV. It is also necessary to consider that the difficulty of access to digital tools and the lack of technological skills can not only alienate the believers from the rituals but also make it difficult to collect the tithes that sustain the churches’ activities, including the media, which have high maintenance costs.

\textbf{Concluding Remarks}

In times of uncertainty such as those experienced in the Covid-19 health and social crisis, religions tend to give multiple responses, within the limits imposed by their conjunctural and social position in each context (Freston 2020). Therefore, the analysis on the defense of the essentiality of religious services by the evangelical-pentecostal churches provides the opportunity to understand their current place in social structure and their relationship with Brazilian State and Government.

Such essentiality has been supported by a dual-function narrative. On the one hand, they argue that they have to offer spiritual, social, and psycho-emotional support to the

\textsuperscript{61} https://www.facebook.com/IgrejaCristaMaranata/posts/1310851279124616

\textsuperscript{62} In the program of the International Church of the Grace of God aired on free-to-air TV networks (Rede TV e Band) on April 4, reports were shown on UFRJ scientists who developed a test for rapid and cheap detection of the coronavirus; the approval of an emergency aid by the President of the Republic, predicting Congress’ approval of the same aid and the masks developed by an American student.

\textsuperscript{63} https://coletivobereia.com.br/ Accessed 15 Jul 2020.

\textsuperscript{64} According to the TIC Domicilios 2019 (Cetic.br 2019), 79\% of the Brazilian population internet has access. However, the access is unequally distributed according to the region, social class and race. In the DE social classes, for instance, 85\% of the people only have internet access through their cell phone which is considered a limited and precarious form of access. https://cetic.br/pesquisa/domicilios/ Accessed 15 Jul 2020.
society and their parish and that it is important to legitimize the constituted authorities of the nation, that is, the Bolsonaro administration, supported by some of these evangelical churches. On the other hand, the defense of this essentiality of religious services has highlighted other meanings of the mediatized religious experience and its potential to regulate the moralities related to the coronavirus.

As shown in the discussion of the performative character of the public events led by the government, the evangelical work during the pandemic has revealed other dimensions of its participation as a public religion, understood as a qualified presence of religious actors in the social sphere, in which they are forced to constantly negotiate their traditional repertoire, before other interlocutors, religious or not, who question their performance socially and theologically (Burity 2019, 2015; Casanova 1994; Montero 2018). The legislative and, pastoral leaderships, as well as media personalities, mobilized a series of theological arguments (spiritual battle, dominion theology, theology of prosperity) to advocate the opening of the temples. They used their political capital, accumulated over the last three decades, to put pressure on authorities and to activate legal mechanisms. Thus, they reaffirm their protagonism as political actors, a position they have been consolidating since the process of re-democratization in the 1980s until Bolsonaro’s presidential election victory (Mariano and Gerardi 2019; Vital-Cunha 2019).

According to Casanova (1994) and Camurça (2019: 138), the public character of a religion (public religion) is determined by its structural position between State and society, and is measured by how it fits into the state apparatus, penetrates the political system and becomes a mobilizing political force in civil society. For Burity (2020), the activism of evangelicals as political actors in recent years shows the construction of a political power project that consolidated itself through the alliances established with Bolsonaro. In the pandemic, the legitimacy bestowed on the federal administration by the evangelicals seems to have resulted in a concrete political gain towards the materialization of this project: the evangelical participation in the power structure. As an indication, in the pandemic period, two evangelical ministers (Justice and Education) were nominated, joining the other already in office since the beginning of the government, the Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights.

Thereby, the evangelicals affirm their social visibility, claim a place in the political structure, and empower their religious identity. This process has as its driving force the political identity of minoritarization, an identity activism that forces the evangelicals to leave their historical political marginality—the social stigma of poverty and as a demographically minority religious group—to occupy representative positions in the country’s political structure (Burity 2020, 2018).

As well as building a power project, these evangelicals aligned with the Bolsonaro administration are committed to consolidating the Brazilian Christian political right. With origins in the American religious response to the cultural changes brought about by feminism, sex education, and the secular humanism of the 1960s, the Christian right-wing fears changes that would dissolve traditional customs and social values. Therefore, they perform as a reactive movement to any threat to the establishment (heteronormative family, morality, tradition, and nation). Hence, Christian churches’ social and political activism is condensed into resistance to the advances in democratization implemented by the egalitarian agenda of the feminist, LGBTQ+, and
ethnic and racial minority movements (Burity 2020; Carranza 2020; Carranza and Vital-Cunha 2018; De la Torre 2020), which have found governability in the progressive governments that have been in power in recent years (Burity 2018: 23) 65

For Guadalupe (2020), the theological presuppositions of this Christian right are found in the theology of prosperity and the dominion theology. And, due to its affinity with the American Christian right the Brazilian Christian right affirms itself as a subaltern right (Burity 2020). Therefore, this helps us to understand the growing Brazilian geopolitical dependence, as demonstrated by Bolsonaro’s mimicking of Trump’s management of the pandemic. However, if the posture of the evangelical leaderships produce political gains, they can also, depending on the final results (lives lost and social deterioration), lose prestige among their followers and/or the broader society (Freston 2020).

As mentioned before, there is an important difference in how the evangelicals of the region perceive the pandemia. Evangelicals from other Latin American countries have been treating the pandemic as a matter of State, so their alignment in accordance with the policies adopted by the WHO, and they place themselves as an aid to the State in the implementation of its public policies. The Brazilian case is very different. For the evangelicals considered here, the health crisis is a matter of government and their alignment is with Bolsonaro. In both cases, there is a political alignment, with their respective gains. What changes is only the side in which they establish themselves. The former with the State, the latter with the government. In both cases, the evangelicals gain social visibility by placing their organizational structure at the service of welfare and socio-charitable initiatives that aim vulnerable populations that need support from the State. Although they collaborate with the State, these groups do not seek to strengthen public health policies, but rather to strengthen themselves as protagonists of assistance actions.

If the concept of public religion helps us to understand the place evangelicals occupy in the power structure, it also demands us to consider how they carry out a negotiation of the traditional repertoire when they enter the media circuit. In the period of the pandemic, this was made explicit when countless evangelical agencies started to give online spiritual support to members of their communities, using technological innovations to offer online services, exponentially expanding the use of media they were already carrying out. By recreating symbolic structures, male and female pastors provided support to fear, anxiety, and anguish management in the face of imminent unemployment, the real threat of death by disease, and vulnerability where the access health services is unequal.

This analyses paid attention to the religious responses offered to the members of the faith communities by churches and leaders. These responses were built not only on the key of spiritual battle and prosperity theology but also upon the idea that religion is an

65 We must, however, make a restriction. The same evangelical leaders who came to executive power with Bolsonaro made alliances with the governments of Lula and Dilma, of the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores), in the elections that put them in power, which shows the pragmatic character that these evangelical segments adopted before diving into the power project of the Christian right. As Burity (2018: 31) discusses, the conservative demands that emerged from the “June 2013 Days,” among other factors, favored new alliances that united evangelicals to the new conservative wave that culminated in Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment in 2016, based on three strategies: demoralization of the anti-cyclical economic policies of the left, the anti-corruption agenda and the reaction to identity policies.
essential service. Despite being “locked up at home,” experiencing a “difficult time,” people should not feel like “slaves to fear,” but should be “free to have joy and hope,” since “after the virus, there will come the best season of your life,” as a pastor said on his weekly TV show. Pastors comforted their community members with the fact that “we are all in the same boat and we will all be hit by the pandemic,” and that faith in God would be the “only possibility of calm, rest and confidence.” Some of the shows aired specials on depression and fear treatment in the times of pandemic, and the churches were available through multiple channels to console the believers even “if [they] are alone, sick or in prison.”

In Brazil, as in other Latin American countries, the Christian churches have used media and digital technologies to continue their activities during the pandemic. However, the country’s scenario was different, since here the religious media circuit consolidated some time ago, and the denominations have unequal resources (Carranza 2011; Bandeira 2017). As demonstrated, unlike the other countries, where the media participation is not so consolidated, Brazilian religious leaderships aligned with the bolsonarismo contributed to the political and informational crisis that has characterized the government’s management of the pandemic. Besides that, they advocated the importance of the churches because their services are essential and fought the pandemic through spiritual actions, rather than as support for pandemic management actions.

Despite the differences, churches in Brazil and other Latin American countries tend to agree that, by naturalizing the use of digital platforms in religious activities that used to be carried out in person and in temple spaces, the bonds between the followers, and between them and the institution, were re-signified, through experiences of conversion, proselytism, and remote follow-up to emotionally vulnerable people. In general, the rites of passage (baptism, Holy Supper, conversion) were adapted, and the demands of the doxa (the norms in the discourse) were negotiated because of the social distancing. Therefore, the compulsory social confinement enabled the religious mediatization as a space of interaction and adaptation of the supports of the traditional practices of faith, more than as a substitution of the physical spaces and in-person meetings.

For Sbardelotto, geographical references, social ties and characteristics of community ties built from spatiality do not serve as parameters for understanding what happens in the virtual environment (Sbardelotto 2012: 327). According to the author, media religiosity is different from in-person social and religious interaction. As previously suggested by Cristina Zuñiga, this type of community interaction forms a new multi-centric religious community that changes the bonds with authority, tradition, and community. Certainly, the forms of aggregation, bonds, and working in the churches, as well as the participation in collective services, continue to be sought. What changes is that now the technological support gives meaning to religious experiences and becomes one more within the numerous forms of mediation. Of course, not all the believers and churches have the same internet access, so it is easier for some to give up their face-to-face experiences, especially the ones Campbell (2012) calls online religions.

In another direction, both in Brazil and in other Latin American countries, the pandemic was seen by the evangelical churches as an opportunity to strengthen and/or maintain family ties that could be deteriorated because of confinement, unemployment and the financial crisis, as several evangelical, catholic and rabbi leaders repeated in the
Easter videoconference. In this sense, the pandemic was interpreted as God’s prophetic providence in order to force people to stay at home and pay attention to God’s word. In a televised service, the pastor stated that “families have to stay together whether they like it or not. The husband cannot go to the bar, the wife to the mall, the son to the party. This is something that God is forcing us to do: take care of our family, look at our home, the old people who are more likely to catch the virus and die.”

In fact, in the pandemic times, the evangelical churches play the role of structuring new religious and social moralities. They develop structures for emotional support and normative resources for the management of interpersonal and marriage conflicts due to the closeness caused by the confinement. They also reinforce a conservative mentality focused on individual care and the divide between collective problems and the domestic sphere. In other words, by defining public behaviors that do not involve participation in the demands of public health policies, the religious moralities corroborate the weakening of the demands for the Government to establish more efficient public health policies to guarantee the rights to protection in moments of social risk.

Finally, this can be one of the portraits of a political and theological fragment of the heterogeneous evangelical field, but it is also true that there are dissenting voices. Voices that cannot be reduced to an ideological opposition between right and left and resist being framed in the conservative-progressive opposition. Thus, the Covid-19 health crisis made some evangelical sectors reveal themselves against the hegemonic project of religious and political power of some legislative, pastoral, and media leaders.

There is a religious base in the churches that has publicly exposed itself and expressed outrage against their leaders’ support to the Bolsonaro government and the legitimization of policies marked by a negationist logic. These religious groups are increasingly exposing - especially on social networks, since they find little space in the traditional media - their disagreement with the aspirations of their brothers in faith who want to build a Christian nation to the detriment of the right to moral and religious pluralism and even of not to having a religion. These are voices that, together with other social voices, declare their non-conformity to the dramatic directions that the pandemic has taken. Not long ago, those religious forces did not mobilize discursively against the emerging Christian political right establishment. However, the positions, narratives, symbolic resources and rituals of these voices, emerging in this ongoing research, are the raw material of the next article.

Availability of Data and Material See references.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Not applicable.

66 Preaching of a pastor on the TV program of the IURD, RecordTV. Seen 20 May 2020.
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