

“Our time has come! It’s time for the church to govern”: evangelicals in Brazilian politics and in our ethnographies

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Abstract

This article analyzes how religious values, around which the campaign of Jair Bolsonaro was organized and which continue to be used to maintain the fidelity of the religious bases of his government, originate from the actions of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the National Congress, which since its establishment has demanded that the values of “the moral majority” be observed by the state. To achieve this, members of the Front instrumentalize legal principles, while also evoking moral panic. These steps, allied to support for other conservative proposals, form the political agenda of a new right that has acted effectively in Brazilian politics and become the political base of a government for which a moral agenda is the backbone of a new state that is “terribly Christian”, extremist and conservative. Given this challenging situation, what are the impacts of this sole truth becoming state policy for social diversities, and on our anthropological reflections about the imbrications between religion and politics?

Key words: Parliamentary Evangelical Front, moral majority, Bolsonaro government, moral agenda, social diversities.

“Chegou a nossa hora! É o momento de a Igreja governar!”: sobre evangélicos na política brasileira e em nossas etnografias

Resumo

Este artigo analisa como valores religiosos, que organizaram a campanha de Jair Bolsonaro continuam sendo usados a fim de fidelizar as bases religiosas ao seu governo, são originários das atuações da Frente Parlamentar Evangélica do Congresso Nacional que desde a sua instauração tem demandado que os valores da “a maioria moral” sejam acatados pelo Estado. Para isso, instrumentalizam princípios jurídicos, mas também evocam pânico morais que aliados a outras pautas conservadoras formam a agenda política de uma nova direita que tem atuado eficazmente na política brasileira e se tornou base política de um governo que tem a pauta moral como espinha dorsal de um novo Estado, “terrivelmente cristão”, extremista e conservador. Diante desse cenário desafiador, quais seriam os impactos dessa verdade única tornada política de Estado para as diversidades sociais? E para as nossas reflexões antropológicas sobre as imbricações entre religião e política?

Palavras-chave: Frente Parlamentar Evangélica, maioria moral, governo Bolsonaro, agenda moral, diversidades sociais.

“Our time has come! It’s time for the church to govern¹”: evangelicals in Brazilian politics and in our ethnographies

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Current suppositions in light of the future-past that is knocking on the door!

When Jair Bolsonaro² won Brazil’s presidential election in 2018, I was immediately taken back to the fieldwork I conducted for my master’s in anthropology in the National Congress³ with the Frente Parlamentar Evangélica [Evangelical Parliamentary Front], between March and July 2010, when I participated in worship services, events, public hearings, and ordinary Commission sessions, especially those that involved political priorities of the group. I accompanied congressional aides in their daily activities and legislators in action in political activities (Duarte, 2011). Considering some knowledge that I acquired during the time that I moved through that space (Duarte, 2014), three questions arise and continue to hover in my thoughts.

The first concerns how Jair Bolsonaro’s speech and behavior, considered spontaneous and not concerned with being politically correct, were validated by a large portion of his electoral base (Solano, 2018). During the campaigns, he affirmed his political profile as a legislator of the so-called “low clergy⁴”, a defender of authoritarianism, of military and police forces, and of arming the population as a solution to the country’s problems. Supported by these agendas, he participated in commissions whose themes involved public safety, and was more likely to react to issues than make proposals in debates⁵.

1 Declarations taken from preaching in 2016 in a Baptist church by Damares Alves, current Minister of Women, Family, and Human Rights of Brazil. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2bJl_W1ovI&feature=emb_title accessed on 09/09/2020.

2 Bolsonaro was elected president with 57,797,847 million votes. At the time of my fieldwork with the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, he was a federal deputy from Rio de Janeiro, a position he held for seven mandates, from 1991 to 2018, in different political parties always aligned to right wing parties.

3 The Chamber of Deputies, in native terms, is referred to as the *house*. The plural, two houses, refers to the National Congress, which also includes the Senate.

4 Expression used to designate legislators who do not have an important role or the necessary capital to influence the manipulations and mechanisms of legislative politics. Bolsonaro was seen as a legislator of the “low cleric”, that is, with having a limited capacity for political articulation and definition, an understanding used by the opposition during the campaign to attack his ability to govern the country. This disqualification was made to seem favorable by the antipolitical rhetoric forged by Bolsonaro’s political allies, as a legitimate indication of his honesty and distance from the old corrupt political class, despite his 30 years of political life and with three sons who are professional politicians. This discourse that he was an *outsider* despite being an *insider* resonated with portions of young voters who, according to Solano (2018:22), “identify Bolsonaro as a rebel, as a political option who communicates with them and opposes the system, as a different proposal. If in the 1970s, to be a rebel was to be from the left, now, for many of these youth, it is to vote in this new right that presented itself in a form that was cool, disguising its hateful discourse in *memes* and fun videos”.

5 One of the scenes that shocked me the most at the time of my research was during the convocation of the Minister of the Special Secretariat of Human Rights Paulo Vannuchi by the Commission of Human Rights and Minorities and by the Commission of Foreign Relations to “provide an accounting” of the National Human Rights Plan-3 (PNDH-3). The meeting took place on 20 April 2010, in the largest chamber of the congress. When the topic of the Commission of Memory and Truth entered the discussion, legislators aligned to the armed forces entered the hall, Bolsonaro was one of them and he made a point of affirming that this was a “commission of calumny” that sought revenge against the military, and accused the Workers Party of having political ties with terrorist groups and the then presidential candidate of Dilma Rousseff to be a “criminal”. Other legislators immediately reacted negatively to this declaration. In 2016, the political climate appeared to be more accustomed to hateful discourse. Perhaps this allowed Bolsonaro to publicly praise the recognized torturer Coronel Ustra (1932-2015), the first military officer condemned by Brazilian courts for crimes committed during the dictatorship, without receiving institutional sanctions, on the day of voting to open impeachment proceedings against President Dilma Rousseff. Various parliamentarians used the podium to refer to their electoral supporters, but particularly to God, country and their families. The majority of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front voted to open the impeachment process.

The second question concerns how Bolsonaro successfully performed an anti-political representation without a need for a party affiliation (Solano, 2018), and which through a “digital political body” (Cesarino, 2019) presented alarmist messages, often not true, but which easily gained wide attention on social networks. Through his electors, who became followers, pre-existing moral values in Brazilian society were mobilized, expanding adherence to Bolsonaro’s political campaign. According to Cesarino (2019), the process of constructing the “myth” (as he came to be referred to with reverence during the electoral campaigns), his political rise, and his electoral success is characterized by this digital populism.

This occurred largely because Bolsonaro was presented as an integral representation of “conservative, neoliberal grammar” (Cesarino, 2019: 549), distinguishing him from the “old right” by linking a defense of arms and severe punishment, a neoliberal economic foundation that emphasizes the self-made-man and a minimum state, support for international anticommunist action and a moral religious agenda that defends the patriarchal family (Lacerda, 2019). During the campaign, these themes stimulated fear, interests and aspirations and above all, religious and moral values that were affirmed while slandering and attacking enemies in hateful discourse presented as freedom of opinion.

My third question, which is as important as it is challenging, stems from a reflection on field data from my research about the Evangelical Parliamentary Front. What is the political importance of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the construction of the presidential candidate and his political success and governability?

Bolsonaro attained electoral success by connecting religious values with the political discourse that the Evangelical Parliamentary Front had been shaping and revising through the action of its members, particularly in congressional commissions that addressed issues of the family, customs, women’s rights, religious freedom, gender and sexualities (Baptista, 2009; Duarte, 2011; Trevisan, 2015, Vital da Cunha and Lopes, 2013).

As we will see, The Evangelical Parliamentary Front has been establishing relations between the sacred principles that they profess and the political positions that they defend through a politicization in reaction (Vaggione, 2006: 26) to agendas of feminist movements, and those to defend sexual and gender diversities and human rights. In part because their political capital appeared to be weak and they had few significant political gains until the 53rd legislature (2007-2010), these legislators had minimal dialog with constitutional principles and participated in various political alliances to strengthen their moral agenda, (in support of the traditional heterosexual family, against legalization of abortion, for conservative social values and against the rights of women and for sexual and gender diversities).

Since the 54th legislature (2011-2014), there has been a strengthening of the Evangelical Front, which based on moralist positions, was able to combine other conservative political positions to compose a new right-wing movement (Lacerda, 2019) capable of changing the direction of a government and a presidential mandate, while influencing social and electoral perceptions. Perhaps most importantly, it became the political base of a government for which a moral agenda is the backbone and a fundament of a new Brazilian state that is “terribly Christian”, extremist and conservative.

Although the objective of this article is not to analyze how and why Jair Messias Bolsonaro won the elections (cf. Cesarino, 2019; Almeida, 2019, Burity, 2018, Py, 2020a) or the ideological-political structure of his government, I want to affirm that moral values that organized his campaign and that are being instrumentalized to maintain the fidelity of the religious bases of his government, originate from the actions of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front which, since it was established, has demanded that the state accept the values of the Christian majority for all of Brazilian society.

In this context, I provoke my own anthropological analyses about the evangelical participation in the legislature, understanding that it no longer involves disputes for space within a plurality of political voices and representations, but the solidification of an alliance of conservative sectors in Brazilian politics to form a

base for a government that is self-entitled Christian, which conceives the state as a sounding board of a single “truth” to which all others must submit.

This involves a new governability which is closely affiliated to the Evangelical Parliamentary Front and its religious bases. The technique employed proliferates fear and hate, doctrines and dogmas, under the cloak of political theories and discourses that threatens social pluralities and constituted and emerging rights, rejects scientific knowledge and challenges anthropological presumptions.

Present pasts: reconsidering some legislative actions of the Evangelical Front

The causes and effects of evangelical participation⁶ in public life, the forms of social, cosmological and ritual organization of evangelical churches and their relations with the times of politics, with disputes over concepts of the secular and religious and secular freedoms as well as their effects on religious, legal and political fields, have had effects beyond the political field and that are highly influential in society, in the social sciences of religion and in the anthropology of religions and politics.

I consider it important to ponder a certain surprise over this sociological novelty (Duarte, 2017) because for centuries the Roman Catholic Church has been hegemonically part of national political life, formulating principles for constitutions, supporting and capillarizing religious values in society, influencing policies and making demands on the state⁷. It is important to recall that historic Protestant sectors also participated in political life in the republican state (Campos, 2010).

In any case, as Baptista (2009) highlights, in the 1950s and 1960s Pentecostal groups were ignored by Brazil’s intellectual and political elites and seen as alienated from political processes, despite their strong adherence to the military regime (Cowan, 2014). Nevertheless, until the 1980s, evangelicals broadly followed a religious sectarianism in relation to the world (Freston, 1993). For this reason, their representations in the legislature and in the National Constituent Assembly (ANC)⁸ were reserved, as has been indicated by Freston (1993) and Baptista (2009). If in the past they had been ignored, today they are leading and not secondary figures (Freston, 1993) in our analyses, due to the political capitals that they have conquered and their effects on politics in the country, the public expression that they have attained, as well as their numeric growth in each census⁹.

The theological turn in the early 1980s when evangelical sectors, particularly those religious corporations with a significant number of faithful, such as the Assembly of God¹⁰, ran “candidates of the church” in the elections of 1986 to dispute the religious field with Roman Catholics, seats in institutional political spaces, relevance in the political debates about projects and moreover, guarantees of benefits from the state for

6 In Brazil, evangelicals is a term used by the media, by the demographic census (Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal evangelicals) and has been technically and scientifically established by the vast production in the social sciences of religion about the religious fields and their relation with politics and public space (Almeida, 2017). The category describes a breadth of religious belonging in the historic Protestant field ranging to the Neopentecostal. I use it here to categorize non-Roman Catholic Christian groups and in the case of legislative politics, Pentecostals and Neopentecostals. I will specify the denominations if and when they are pertinent.

7 On 31 May 1931, Getúlio Vargas, then president, proclaimed Our Lady of Conception, the Virgin Mary, the Patron Saint of Brazil. In 1980, during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Brazil, the military government declared 12 October [the day of this patron saint] as a national holiday.

8 The National Constituent Assembly was installed in the National Congress in 1987 by the deputies and senators elected in 1986. Its function was to draft a new constitution after 21 years of military rule. The work of the Constituent Assembly was conducted by thematic commissions that would establish the base for the final text of the Constitution to be voted on by the full the house.

9 Alves and Barros and Cavenaghi (2012) project a growth trend among Pentecostal and Neopentecostal groups that could shape an evangelical majority in coming decades, going beyond Catholics for the first time. These authors indicate the need to better analyze and detail the new religious cartography that is shaped, while also remaining attentive to the increase, indicated by the 2010 census, in people who declare they have no religion.

10 The Assembly of God is a Pentecostal church founded in 1911 in the city of Belém, Pará (in northern Brazil) by the Swiss men Gunnar Vingren and Daniel Berg who were Baptists who brought the doctrine of baptism in the holy spirit and speaking in spiritual tongues that they had learned, in 1906, in the Azusa Street Revival, in Los Angeles, led by pastor William Joseph Seymour, the creator of the Pentecostal movement.

the groups that they represent. Given a “new national pact” (Baptista, 2009: 160) that would establish a new foundation for Brazilian society after the National Constituent Assembly, the argument “evangelicals do not get involved in politics” shifted to a biblical reading that justified a new undertaking: participating in the Constituent Assembly allowed the evangelicals to “rewrite” Brazilian history, reshaping the place of the “People of God” in society (Freston, 1993). How prophetic!

A Front of many Fronts

The Evangelical Parliamentary Front¹¹ was only established in the National Congress in the 52nd legislature (2003-2006), on 18 September 2003 in a special session in honor of the National Day of Missions. Deputy Adelor Vieira¹² (Brazilian Democratic Movement Party/Santa Catarina) was elected as the first president, and the executive board was composed mostly of deputies affiliated to the Assembly of God. At that ceremony, Deputy Pedro Ribeiro (Party of the Republic, Ceará) acclaimed “by the mercy of God and in the name of Jesus” the establishment of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front of the National Congress and prayed for the life of the legislators and for “unity” among them¹³.

The strategy adopted by its leaders was of partisan plurality to expand the capillarity of the evangelicals in the Congress to attain the political objectives of the group, the defense of the family, morality and good customs (Duarte, 2011: 55-56, Baptista, 2009). To do so, deputies Adelor Vieira, Raimundo Santos and Pedro Ribeiro proposed the realization of weekly religious rituals¹⁴ when they could engender both a “strategic mobilization” (Baptista, 2009) around the agenda of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, and promote evangelization and evangelical conversion in the legislative space.

I conducted field work among the daily legislative activities of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front at the end of the 53rd legislature (2007-2010), which had lower Evangelical presence due to the so-called “scandal of the leaches¹⁵” in the previous legislature (2003-2006). It was early 2010, at a time of heightened political activity due to the presidential elections that would be held in October. Nevertheless, even with only 56 legislators¹⁶, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front established its presence in the House, especially through opposition to the National Human Rights Program-3 and through representation of a controversial bill known as the Statute of the Unborn Child.

11 Although it was established in that legislature, it was only in 2015 that the Front was formalized when it attained signatures of 199 deputies and 4 senators, that is, more than one-third of all the legislators as required by regulations of the house.

12 This composition refers to the name of the political party of the legislator and the state he represents.

13 José Duque, a member of the Assembly of God, an aide to deputy Pedro Ribeiro, exercised the function of “master of praise” of the worship services since the establishment of the Evangelical Front and said that the engagement of legislators in the activities proposed by the Front was not broadly cohesive, self-seeking and participatory. I observed during my field work that few deputies participated regularly in the services and they were the same ones who organized their political action based on the “the activities of the Front”. As José Duque, warned in the 53rd legislature (2007-2010) nearly fifteen attended the services weekly, although many identified themselves as evangelicals. There were also those who did not have specific interest in correlating their political trajectories to the positions of the Front.

14 The Constitution of 1988 reaffirmed the prohibition of establishing, assisting or encumbering the operation of religious services. It does allow for the possibility of “collaboration in the public interest” between the state and churches, as had been foreseen by the Constitutions of 1934 and 1967.

15 In May 2006, an operation of the Federal Police and the Federal Public Ministry uncovered a scheme to appropriate public health funds by a group composed of business owners, politicians and public employees. The Congress established a Parliamentary Investigative Commission (CPI), at the request of some parties, to analyze the cases of deputies and senators accused of involvement, requesting opening of procedures for deviating from parliamentary decorum. One third of those accused were evangelicals, especially from the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and the Assembly of God. The impact of this case was significant for the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, and even on municipal elections (Almeida, 2017).

16 The profile of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the 53rd legislature was composed by a mostly male group (only five were female) whose average age was above 40, mostly members of Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches. In the current legislature (2019-2022) the profile is quite similar, the only change perhaps is that we have a Congress classified as more conservative and with more new members than ever (DIAP, 2018).

On my first day of research, I encountered a worship service, during legislative hours, in one of the rooms of the Commission. Even taken by a disorienting shock to my certainties about forms of political representation and participation and their sacred agencyings (Duarte, 2014), over time, I began to understand the importance of that ritual as an “anthropological find” (Duarte, 2012). Due to long experience with ethnographic analysis of evangelical services and their policies (Damasceno, 2004), I considered their worship services as one of the spaces for the Front to establish their presence, because it involved an “effective performance of [religious] discourse” (Bourdieu, 1996: 82) that provided those legislators with capital needed to conduct alliances, defend bills, benefit their churches, influence policy and the religious field itself.

To do so, they often used the metaphor of “being a missionary in the legislative House” which gave meaning to the radical defense of life from conception, the traditional family and moral values that represented the nation. However, they affirmed they should also be “servants of Christ”, marking other abilities that they should grasp to justify their political vocations. As servants, not public, but of Christ, they serve their bases and churches and would be the leaders in the constitution of a society “redeemed by the lamb”.

In this way, they occupy politics through a “war of images” (Latour, 2008) between religious values and the pernicious values raised by feminist movements, intellectuals and relativists, establishing emblems, constructing their reputations, evoking feelings and producing religious truths to fight against bills, groups and themes that are enemies of the Gospel. Since then, the Evangelical Front has been developing a technical staff specialized in political action not only in the legislature, but also in the executive and judiciary branches to act in the name “of life” as is the case of Minister Damares Alves¹⁷.

The moral agenda was the calling card of the Evangelical Front in its radical action in the legislature “for life and for family”, especially because it was always more closely aligned historically to conservative positions towards customs and economic liberalism. Nevertheless, at the time of my research, the executive branch was highly conciliatory, but did not consider itself Christian. Thus, the Evangelical Front, in various ethnographic situations invested in the need to be “players” in the legislature and no longer “beggars” (Vital da Cunha and Lopes and Lui, 2017: 126), to make their moral agenda not only a bargaining chip in exchange of votes, but an influential tool in the House, in public policies and in society.

The political action of the Evangelical Front was not limited to citing biblical verse in bills, members understood that they had to learn the political strategies needed to play to win. As we saw, they instrumentalized legal principles so that religious moral precepts would be validated in bills proposed, thus exploiting the conservative trend in a population extremely discriminatory towards social changes and new cultural, sexual and familiar parameters. For example, they evoked moral panic by affirming that the government would teach children in school about sex, to oppose discussions about gender. And they were able to gain adhesions, particularly in moments of economic and political crisis as Brazil experienced since 2013, and above all in electoral periods characterized by divisions, threats, and conflict and more recently, by the proliferation of hate on social networks and radicalization of political polarizations.

¹⁷ Damares Alves is an attorney and for more than two decades was an aide to various evangelical legislators, in the Evangelical Front and in the Parliamentary Front in Defense of Life and Family. She also serves in the National Evangelical Forum for Social and Political Action (an entity that conducts activities and leads initiatives in defense of Christian principles in Brazilian society) and in the Brazil Without Abortion Movement. Since the 1990s, she has participated in religious missions to indigenous populations and adopted a child from the Kamayurá village in Xingu. Damares was author of a bill known as the “Muwaji Law” (2007) that sought to intervene in the cultural practice of child killing that she maintains is widely accepted among indigenous peoples and supported by the National Indian Foundation and by anthropologists and their professional association. Damares Alves was one of the founders of the National Association of Evangelical Juristas (ANAJURE), which is composed of judges and legal professionals, and acts in Brazil and abroad under the theme “Defense of Fundamental Civil Liberties”, in particular, religious freedom, freedom of expression and dignity of the human person. Since its creation in 2012, the association has provided legal support to bills of the Evangelical Front and other conservative fronts in the legislature.

Ideologization and religious truth, moral majority, modalities of secularism and human rights in the discourse of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front: previous notes, but current questions

21 December 2009

The Secretariat of Human Rights of the government of President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva published a decree that approved the National Human Rights Program-3 (PNDH-3)¹⁸ which sought to strengthen principles in the Brazilian Constitution and ratification by Brazil of international declarations and pacts about human rights. Reactions in opposition from part of the Congress were immediate and endorsed and promoted by major media outlets, which in name of freedom of the press, opposed a proposal to create a legal framework for radio broadcasting supported by a culture of human rights and with possible warnings about violations. The newspaper headlines in Brazil strongly accused the government of attempts to censor the press and control the news. Evangelical and Catholic groups and their religious supporters in Congress also manifest their support for freedom of religious expression and in defense of the family and life.

17 March 2010

It was my first day of fieldwork. After the service, the National Human Rights Program-3 was the topic of political discussion that generally followed the sacred time of the religious service. One of the aides to the Evangelical Front warned the deputies that on the following Wednesday after the religious service, a meeting would be held among evangelical leaders to discuss the National Human Rights Program-3 and develop strategies. The president of the Evangelical Front made a point of emphasizing “the Front’s victory” in removing three points of interest of the religious community from the National Human Rights Program-3. In that election year, the National Human Rights Program-3 prompted indignant reactions in Congress, not only from religious sectors, but also from representatives of agribusiness and military interests¹⁹ who mobilized sufficiently effective opposition to shake inter-ministerial relations and the Lula government and influence the 2010 campaign. They may have given origin to the rhetoric that lifted Jair Bolsonaro to the presidency and that in many ways support him politically in power (Solano, 2019).

¹⁸ The process of construction of elements of the National Human Rights Program-3 had involved 11 conferences throughout Brazil. It was approved by state governors from different political parties, and by a tripartite working group that once again debated the agenda of the program. The National Human Rights Program-3 was presented as a tool for strengthening Brazilian democracy which does not have the strength of law but would serve as a suggestion of the federal executive branch for other entities of the republic. The National Human Rights Program-3 had six thematic lines: democratic interaction between state and civil society as a tool for strengthening participatory democracy; Development and Human Rights; Universalizing Rights in a Context of Inequalities; Public Safety, Access to Justice and Combating Violence; Education and Culture in Human Rights and the Right to Memory and Truth. On 12 May 2010, then President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva changed nine points of the plan to attend demands of the military, religious interests and agribusiness.

¹⁹ The National Truth Commission operated from 2012 to 2014 and documented human rights violations and violence provoked by state agents, between 18 September 1964 and 5 October 1988. Its objective was to improve memory and understanding of the truth about the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship, strengthening the struggle for justice. There is an understanding that the establishment of the Commission for Memory and Truth was seen as revenge against the military and provoked a strong reaction in the military forces, which was interested in maintaining the narrative that they are saviors of the nation, to preserve the official memory and not impute blame for crimes committed by the military (Adorno, 2010). Leirner (2019) indicates that from this situation arose the organization of the Military Forces in relation to the new political participation in the executive branch, and in the federal government, using rhetoric that defined the enemy to be fought in a new and now political war with a communist ideological threat. According to the author, the army command had authorized Bolsonaro to conduct an internal campaign in military barracks since 2014. Lacerda (2019) affirms that since the 55th legislature the National Congress began alignments around the candidacy of Jair Bolsonaro. Vital da Cunha and Lopes (2013) interviewed Bolsonaro in late 2010 during discussions about the project “School without Homophobia” (a proposal of public policies issued by the federal government to be implemented by public schools to fight discrimination and violence related to sexual orientation and gender identities) and raised some issues that he came to defend in the Congress that brought him closer to the religious caucuses. Over time, he began to adhere politically to the agenda of the Evangelical Front (Py, 2020a).

24 March 2010. Seminar “Family, Church, and the National Human Rights Program-3 (PNDH-3)”

The Evangelical Parliamentary Front held the seminar in conjunction with the National Program in Defense of Life and Family and participants included federal deputies, senators, various local political representatives, and those with an evangelical and Catholic base. The objective was to promote a Christian union against the “lascivious content of the National Human Rights Program-3” which was a threat to the Brazilian family, as Deputy Henrique Afonso (Green Party/Acre) proclaimed. The event included among its organizers then aide to Senator Magno Malta (Liberal Party/Espírito Santo), now Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights, Damares Alves²⁰.

Given that the electoral campaigns were approaching, the tone of the discourses evoked the Christian responsibility to vote in candidates committed “to life”. Then president of the Evangelical Front João Campos (Brazilian Social Democratic Party/Goiás) emphasized that the evangelical base must demand that candidates be committed to “Evangelical issues”, and to those of the churches present at the important political moments and also to monitoring the campaigns of candidates to executive positions.

In this sense, the Evangelical Front sought not to be limited to aggregating or trading votes in the legislatures, but to act as a negotiator capable of earning benefits from the support offered to candidates and influencing important political decisions. For this reason it is pertinent to review some of the rhetoric used at that event about the National Human Rights Program-3, to understand how the Evangelical Front constructed political capital needed to influence the 2010 elections. This marked its break from the (impious) Workers Party governments, and the formation of a new Christian right-wing political force that would later become capable of winning an executive election for a candidate known to be from the far-right (Burity, 2018; Almeida, 2019).

The first was the ideologization of the National Human Rights Program-3 through the theology of Spiritual War (Mariz, 1997), which is particular to Pentecostal and Neopentecostal denominations, which believe that religious and political disputes involve a conflict of good against demons (personified in other religions, political ideologies, social movements), which act in the lives of evangelicals through difficulties, scarcities, illness and addictions. Thus, the decree was the work of the enemy, which was articulated to leftist political and social sectors – “post-modern culture”, cultural relativism, intellectuals, the non-religious – who promote the moral decay of the population by ignoring the nation’s religious values. In this context, legislators and religious leaders emphasize the need for prayer and the intercession of religious communities to undermine the spiritual forces behind the National Human Rights Program -3.

Nevertheless, a political mobilization of the evangelical bases was also necessary, especially because this diabolical ideology that supported the National Human Rights Program-3 sought to establish a communist dictatorship in the country to “muzzle” religions and suppress the religious liberties of the moral majority. The theological rhetoric about the enemy to be fought was combined with attacks on “post-modernity”, atheist humanism, intellectualities and the equally atheist sciences, because they were ideologies that did not respect religions and supported the “culture of death” promoted by intellectuals and feminist and LGBT+²¹ movements, in detriment to the “culture of life” that religions defend. Relativism and cultural relativism at times were used to affirm that non-religious culture is dangerous because it threatens Christian values.

²⁰ On that day, Damares Alves spoke about the right to life of indigenous children affirming that the cultural relativism of the Brazilian Anthropology Association (ABA) sought to justify their death, as did the omission of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI). She added that the Evangelical Front had been pioneer in these issues and their defense in the legislature, and mentioned her adoption of an indigenous daughter and the formation of a group she created to defend the lives of indigenous children. Damares was issued a medal in recognition of her work in defense of life, family and indigenous children.

²¹ Following the acronym used by the Brazilian Association of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites, Transexuals and Intersexuals (ABGLT).

Thus, the National Human Rights Program-3 was depicted as a document made by “a bold intelligence” (Bishop Rodovalho, Progressive Party/Distrito Federal) that by using a language permeated by “evil, misleading and lying words”, sought to “oppose the truth” (the only one, the exegetically fundamentalist Christian religious truth). “They do not say that it is homosexual marriage. No! It is a homo-affective union of people of the same sex. Homo-affective! 90% of the Brazilian population will not know how to interpret this. They are sophisms!”, shouted Deputy Miguel Martini.

Based on the presumption that the National Human Rights Program-3 sought to implement “a dictatorship of minorities” through ideas that would be gradually spread through society and become “natural”, these legislators determined it was necessary that Christians fight that evil not only in the legislature, but in their own spaces of faith. This is because many religious people were already seeking, according to the deputy, “anti-Christian ideologies, borrowed because they no longer believe in the ideology of the gospel”. This would be one of the reflexes of atheist intellectualism in society.

Thus, the National Human Rights Program-3 was considered by the Evangelical Front to be a text of the militants of the “dictatorship of relativism” (Duarte, 2011) that would attack the secular (not atheist), democratic state (which respects religions) and the moral values of the majority of the population. That is, relativism as a paradigm of post-modernity appeared to relativize various customs, except religious ones. For this reason, projects such as the criminalization of homophobia²² would be seen as mechanisms that, appearing to defend secularism, promote “the gagging of people who dare to express a different opinion, and even religious ministers who dare to teach the Bible, teach the word of God about this”, as congressional aide José Duque affirmed. Edward Luz²³, in his talk at the Seminar, and various legislators of the Evangelical Front at other events that I witnessed, affirmed that democracy is the government of the majority and therefore, it would be up to them to legislate for and according to its values that represent the nation. Thus, the legitimate national Brazilian culture (Ranquetat Jr., 2012) must be respected by all of society. It was this population that the Evangelical Front imagined to be moral and mostly religious that must be served by the state.

During the campaign, Bolsonaro affirmed that he would have “a government of the [Christian and conservative] majority” and that minorities would have to submit. This discourse, which some described as “Brazilian Christofacism” (Py, 2020a), was based on a Manichaistic theology of spiritual war and an authoritarian and violent rhetoric that decreed a war must be “sustained in the memory of Christ, European and colonizer: sacrificial and atoning of social minorities” (Py, 2020a:25). It is with this reading of Christianity that the evangelical bases – the result of the recent configuration of the conservative Christian right that affirmed that its religious truth and conservative moral values were representative of the nation, while denying rights to diversity and those of social minorities – nourished the current Brazilian government, but also broad portions of society.

22 Nevertheless, as José Duque affirmed, even if the Evangelical Front opposed criminalizing homophobia, the evangelical sector “did not wish aggressions against anyone or violence against any human being”, because “we have no type of fury, anger or intention against the homosexual”. Thus, “we are not homophobic because we are not opposed to homosexuals, but against a practice that is considered a sin, antibiblical, the person is loved by God”.

23 With a bachelor’s in the social sciences, Edward Luz was questioned by the Associação Brasileira de Antropologia in 2013 for violating the association’s code of ethics for attacking indigenous rights and accusing people of passing themselves off as Indigenous. He wound up asking to be removed from the association. Known as the “anthropologist of agribusiness” he had aligned himself to agribusiness and other conservative interests against the demarcation of lands and the constitutional rights of Indigenous peoples, *quilombola* residents. He is the son of the president of the entity Missão Novas Tribos which has operated in indigenous territories to promote religious missions since the 1950s. About Edward Luz and Novas Missões see https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2015/12/25/politica/1451067360_021971.html accessed on 10/09/2020 and <https://apublica.org/2015/12/truco-o-antropologo-dos-ruralistas/> accessed 09/09/2020.

Correlated to the idea of the moral majority are the modalities of secularism²⁴ (Giumbelli, 2008) formulated and used by the Evangelical Front in their debates and proposals in Congress. The first affirms the validity of the secular state that, not being atheist, should embrace the participation of religions in public and political space, which Zylbersztajn (2016) calls this “separation with collaboration”. For this reason, they refute criticisms of their presence in politics, because if feminist movements can propose bills and laws, as representatives of the majority, they can as well²⁵.

The second conceptual modality of secularism used by the Evangelical Front denies a number of democratic principles, while affirming that their equality before the law and right to freedom of expression guarantee that Evangelicals are free to profess their faith. In this way, when they defend religious liberty, the Evangelical Front uses secularism as an absolute principle to serve the moral majority, while denying the rights of other peoples and groups.

The final modality of secularism defended is that a state that does not encompass the convictions of religions would impose a “secular dogma”, violating its own principle, given that the state must respect religions (Christian ones of course). Also based on the argument of the moral majority, they understand freedom of expression and individual liberties to be absolute rights, correlating them to biblical texts taken out of context, either to demonize other religions or to affirm that religious leaders can preach what is written in the Bible, even if this violates the laws of other people²⁶.

Given these dangers, Henrique Afonso (Green Party/Acre) from the Evangelical Parliamentary Front had no doubts when he affirmed that the “prophetic voice of the People of Christ” should rise against the evil points of the National Human Rights Program-3 which would lower the Holy Bible in detriment to non-religious culture.

We must position ourselves as protagonists in the construction of a Brazil that is different for each of us. A different Brazil, afflicted by the hope given to Brazil by the announcement of the Gospel, of law, of love, of the complete establishment of justice, that is, of a redeemed Brazil. A Brazil whose politics can be redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. An economy redeemed by the lamb. The communication media, art, literature, education, healthcare, leisure, culture, that is, all aspects can be at the foot of the cross and be redeemed. We are thinking of a Brazil that can simultaneously be subject to the concrete establishment of the good news of Gospel here on earth!” (Duarte, 2011: 100)

In this way, Henrique Afonso made clear the need of the church not only to vote, but to begin to exercise citizenship through more active participation in politics and government taking to these spaces the words whose “truth is unquestionable”. For this reason,

This seminar must raise the word of God and say that this truth belongs to yesterday, and to today and will be eternal. That this truth is light for our paths and a lamp for our feet. And that the nations that look to this truth, and have this truth as light, as a lamp for the construction of their society, will be a nation like a spring of water, will be a nation like a garden irrigated by God and will be a nation that will extend its hands to the poor, to those

24 According to Zylbersztajn (2016:42), “there is no measure in the constitutional text that expressly determines that the federative Republic of Brazil is a secular state”. There is only a general guideline about the correlation between democracy, liberty and equality as elements that shape the principle of secularity.

25 I often think of the criticism made by a student during a lecture at an event about religion and politics, when the student questioned: why can't he as a Christian make demands upon the state based on his beliefs? Why was democracy constructed as if beliefs were not guaranteed by the Constitution? And finally, if other social sectors could participate in political life, why can't the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, in a representative system, represent millions of evangelicals in the country? But there are questions he did not ask? What are the effects of the introduction of religious beliefs and moralities in the state, especially when it seeks to impose specific moral and religious values on the entire population? Wouldn't this establish an hierarchy and differentiated power among religious beliefs? Would it permit those who have other beliefs and those who do not have religion to enjoy freedom of expression? Would there be repression of those who do not adhere to religions or to religious moralities? (See Machado, 2016).

26 About this theme, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front has made political efforts in the realm of the Federal Council of Psychology to strike down guidelines that establish norms for ethical clinical activity by psychology professionals to prevent treatment of sexual orientation and non-binary gender identities as illnesses.

treated unjustly and to the afflicted. It will be a nation that will look to the children even from the maternal womb and will give dignity to children, offering the right to be happy from the maternal womb. This nation that looks to this truth, raises the Gospel and sees this word as a light and a lamp, concluding, she will ride, but she will ride in high places of the earth. And the Lord will call to say: my nation, sheep! And we will be a redeemed people, a redeemed nation. A nation where one can look to the future and say: we are in the hands of Our Lord. This is the reason for this Seminar (Duarte, 2011: 111).

The word of God, as he says, has the power to construct the society desired by Christians, and for this reason, they should go to the world and preach the Gospel so that all people know the truth, not that of the relativists, but the only truth – which for fundamentalist hermeneutics is atemporal, unerring and undebatable – which will free the nation. Despite using rhetoric based on the biblical text to justify political action against the National Human Rights Program-3, deputy João Campos emphasized that evangelicals were not opposed to human rights, but opposed to certain points “that do not have our agreement, our conviction”.

He thus made clear that he supports “a human rights policy for all”, as long as it follows the interpretations of the conservative evangelicals. Contradictorily, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front also positioned itself, at that time, as a defender “of those people who depend very intensely on public power and on the social security system” (Duarte, 2011:100), and to be against criminality, corruption in politics and in public service, social injustices, social inequalities, the non-distribution of income and for respect for children and the elderly²⁷.

The Bolsonarist bases (a term coined by defenders of Jair Bolsonaro) also do not consider themselves to be against rights, but conceive human rights partially: in that they only apply to “good citizens ²⁸” (Solano, 2019; Kalil, 2018). This idea gained strength in Bolsonaro’s electoral campaign, which depicted his followers as a representatives of the patriotic population that worked for the country’s development and who do not benefit from public policies, particularly, those created by the Workers Party government. Thus, a new group rose as a government priority, which saw itself represented in the candidate who joked about his intolerance, hate, racism, discrimination and even promoted violence, and presented this as a legitimate way to conduct and participate in politics.

This polarized logic distinguishes between those who conquer material gains on their own merit and those who benefit from state policies. The Bolsonarist bases also demonize other mediators among individuals, knowledge and political participation – teachers, intellectuals – thus moralizing the “public debate, presenting adversaries as enemies not only of political order, but also of moral and religious order” (Solano, 2019:17).

This evangelical political action declared that its enemies wanted to spread evil through the world created by God and subvert the moral values of society by anti-religious political proposals. This also stems from connections between politics and religious truths, which are not the same, made by the Evangelical Parliamentary Front in various political times and spaces where it effectively defended an absolute right to life from the moment of conception and that the sole model for the family is that established by God.

27 This position changed, given that most voted to support the Proposed Constitutional Amendment (PEC) to freeze public spending, a bill that authorized outsourcing work in all economic sectors, and a proposed constitutional amendment to reduce the age of criminalization from 18 to 16. The broad majority of the Evangelical Front also positioned itself in support of labor and social security reforms proposed by the Temer Government (2016-2018).

28 Other electors of the current government (Kalil, 2018) included: Feminine and “bolsogatas” [Bolsochicks]: women “empowered” beyond the “mimimi”; Right-wing mothers: who supported schools without “gender ideology”; religious leaders for the defense of the family against the “gay kit”; and against other sins; religious Christians for the “traditional family”; anticommunists and neoconservatives; as well as “good citizens”; those who support virile masculinity; arms, the armed forces and the police, and even those who are politically neutral.

Anti-gender and pro-life: how non-people become protected by law and how those protected by law become non-people

20 April 2010, Chamber of Deputies, Hearing with the Minister of the Secretariat of Human Rights of the Presidency of the Republic, Paulo Vanucchi²⁹.

Christian religions were supported, in various historic spaces and times, by patriarchal cultural bases that affirm a biological difference between the sexes that “naturally” establishes asymmetrical roles and places for men and women in societies. These standards and stereotypes of men and women continue to be reproduced in contemporary religious communities and reified in schools, churches, policies and in the ways that people organize gender repertoires. Supported by this theological hermeneutic of inequality, most Christian communities (but not all) have refused to discuss agendas raised by feminist movements, given that gender equality has been understood to be contrary to biblical principles and to religious moral values.

However, the intensity of the defense of a binary sense of inequality by conservative religious sectors grew in response to the expansion of social movements that defend the rights of women and rights to sexual diversity. Over the decades, this articulation has intensified social fears, particularly in conservative families that consider it important to maintain authority and control over the education of their children. The expression “gender ideology” – formulated in the 1990s by the Vatican – has been promoted as an evil proposal of women’s and feminist movements and sectors of the left interested in contradicting the binary order of the sexes and imposing a new order (considered to be disorder) on relations between men and women.

In a hearing with the Minister about the National Human Rights Program-3, the Catholic Deputy Paes de Lira (Christian Workers Party/São Paulo) affirmed that the decree included a “pernicious expression” – “deconstruction of heteronormativity” – and thus sought to impose “gender ideology” on families, denying parents their right to educate a boy as a boy and a girl as a girl. For these groups, sexual and gender diversities, personified in gays, lesbians, transvestites, bisexuals, transsexuals, transgenders and others identities, are deviations from what is normal, moral and naturally established by the word of God and accepted by the broad majority of society.

As Biroli (2018) and Machado (2016) indicated, since the numerous debates in governmental and non-governmental spaces in the 1990s about public policies to support sexual and gender diversity, conservative religious sectors, above all Catholics, raised their voices against the rights of women, and sexual and reproductive freedoms, which they saw as attacks on religious morality. These conservative religious groups thus began influencing, although in lower intensity in that decade, political agendas raised by the feminist movements. Since the middle of the decade of 2000, to counter the influence of international conferences in support of human rights, there was an international alignment of conservative forces to compose a global policy against gender equality and sexual diversities and to affirm the sanctity of the “traditional and natural family”. This has been an important front in the political battle of these sectors.

Junqueira (2017) affirmed that the formation of an anti-gender lexicon among ultraconservative Catholic groups established the foundations these groups needed to politically counter the agendas of sexual diversity and gender in government policies and social spaces such as schools. By stigmatizing feminism as a negative political movement that is opposed to religious beliefs and moralities, feminist theoretical formulations are “captured, decontextualized, homogenized, drained, reduced to a theory, distorted, caricaturized and imbued with grotesque elements to finally be denounced and repelled” (Junqueira, 2017: 29).

²⁹ He held this post from 21 December 2005 until 31 December 2010, during the governments of Luís Inácio Lula da Silva (1 January 2003 until 1 January 2011).

For Junqueira, this can create an opening in society to support “antiseccular, antifeminist, and antidemocratic concepts, values and dispositions” (2017:47) reviving male domination, gender norms of a heterosexual matrix and mainly establishing “moral, religious, traditional, dogmatic, intransigent and antipluralist marks” (2017:48) as legitimate values for the political action of the secular state.

The anti-gender lexicon incited the structural misogyny of our society and consequently gender violences and the legitimations of gender inequalities. At the heart of debates in 2014 about new guidelines for the National Education Plan, religious and conservative sectors made considerable noise and were able to bar use of the term gender, preventing a variety of discussions in schools. Opposition to use of the term gender supported by the Evangelical Parliamentary Front is present in the current presidential policy. One of the main guidelines of the Bolsonaro Government to the Ministry of Foreign Relations is that public agents who represent the country in international forums not approve agreements and guidelines that contain the word gender.

It is important to say that Minister Damares had solid relations with the Catholic caucus and conservative groups in Congress to establish a Christian unity “for life and for family”, which is now reflected in a ministry that has abolished the term gender from its policies and promoted an international ideological anti-gender crusade. Soon after she became Minister of Women the Family and Human Rights, Damares Alves affirmed: “this is a new era for Brazil!: boys wear blue and girls wear pink”. She thus used “a rhetorical tool to demonstrate that from that point on, the rigid division of criteria for sex without other variations of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation, would be the concept that would guide her human rights policy” (Camurça, 2020:98). In this way, in dialog with the fears of the evangelical bases, she distanced Brazil from the broad international human rights agenda and brought it closer to conservative theocratic countries that are highly violent towards women and sexual and gender diversities.

In this sense, it is by making gender a tool for moral panic in the religious fields and in society that these groups have challenged women’s movements and the conquests of women in society. It is by instrumentalizing conservative ideas, in a society still permeated by the political influence of truly patriarchal religious truths, that these conservative evangelical sectors, organized around the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, continue to have a perverse influence on the human rights agenda and particularly on the rights of women. Their political effectiveness has substantially increased because since 2019 they are aligned with and are participants in a government that has instrumentalized these moral positions even more, thus nourishing its bases of support.

28 April 2010, “Government officials for life”, held by the Parliamentary Front in Defense of Life and against Abortion, in partnership with the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, the Catholic and Spiritist caucus and “pro-life” entities.

Vote on the Statute of the Unborn Child in the Commission on Social Security and Family of the Chamber of Deputies.

The event “Government Officials for life” was organized to improve relations among the religious and conservative sectors of Congress and society to prevent the direction given to the question of sexual and reproductive rights in the National Human Rights Plan-3 and to guide to religious bases in relation to the 2010 elections. The national campaign “Legislators and Government Officials for Life – Life depends on your vote” held by the National Citizens for Life, Brazil without Abortion Movement, was launched to warn voters about the positions of all candidates about abortion. Thus, as proposed in the Seminar of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, about the National Human Rights Program-3, the objective was to unite the evangelical bases to pressure not only Congress, but the candidates, to influence the elections.

On the same day as the meeting, evangelical and catholic deputies were warned that the Statute of the Unborn Child would be voted on that day in the Commission of Social Security and the Family (CSSF). As soon as they were warned that the proposal would be voted on, I ran with them to the commission meeting. The arguments followed those presented in the public hearing about the National Human Rights Plan-3: life begins at conception and this is not a religious position but is scientifically validated. The issue was voted on and defeated in the Congress.

Catholic deputies in particular led debates to affirm the importance of Christians committed to “that little person in the mother’s womb” that “is not an embryo, is not a fetus, but a human” (Deputy Paes de Lira; Duarte, 2011: 134), to continue to oppose bills that may be deliberated on in Congress to support legalization of abortion. The fact is that the government withdrew its recommendations for abortion legislation in the National Human Rights Program-3 even before the beginning of the electoral campaigns.

The meaning given to the category life by the Evangelical Parliamentary Front uses Catholic natural law according to which a person, even before their concrete existence, is already materiality, and therefore their right to live precedes any law of the state. Therefore, Catholic natural law is given precedent over rights established by modern democracies and cannot be legislated by human will and by cultural changes. Thus, the family (patriarchal, in the singular) is seen as a natural entity that results only from the relationship between a man and a woman, that life is given by God, and a human being is created at the moment of fertilization.

The Statute of the Unborn Child gained considerable attention in the news not only because it intended to guarantee the right to life of the fetus, from the moment of conception, making it an absolute unconditional right, but because the sole paragraph of article 13 of the proposal emphasized “if the genitor is identified, he will be responsible for the food support referred to in clause II of this article; if he is not identified, or if he is insolvent, the obligation falls on the state” (notes to the bill). Deputy Jô Moraes (Communist Party of Brazil/ Minas Gerais) argued: “suddenly we have created mechanisms that nearly decriminalize rape”. He added: this law “establishes the right of a rapist to provide support to a child! The poor rapist! [...] This is a Rape Grant!”. The proposal was approved in the Commission for the Family and Social Security, marking an important victory for the religious caucuses.

In the first round of the presidential election of 2010, the issue of legalizing abortion became central to the debates and campaign ads of candidates José Serra/Brazilian Social Democratic Party and Dilma Rousseff/Workers Party (Duarte, 2011; Vital da Cunha and Lopes, 2013). Right-wing political sectors and some Christian denominations (Catholics and evangelicals) campaigned nationwide “for family values” and “life since conception”. There was thus a division even within religious and political sectors because affiliation to one of candidates was justified by a commitment to the “culture of life” or the “culture of death” (Duarte, 2011).

That war of images (Latour, 2008) in 2010 marked not only distinct political projects and positions disputing their amulets, but how through well-oriented rhetoric and strategies, the conservative ideas that compose the nation drove public controversies that steered the election. Since then, religious opposition to the legalization of abortion has become increasingly more critical. I had conducted an ethnography of the defense of Statute of the Unborn Child – which would not only influence elections, but the lives of women and girls – but I could not imagine how the argument of the “life itself” of the embryo, in detriment to the rights of women, would become even more dogmatic in the current conservative religious movements that seek to setback the law of legal abortion³⁰.

30 In Brazil, abortion is permitted in three situations: if the pregnancy is due to rape, if the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother and if the fetus has anencephalia (the lack of formation of the brain). The procedure can be conducted in any hospital that offers gynecological and obstetric services and must have proper equipment and a staff trained in legal abortion. Nevertheless, many healthcare services and professionals still refuse to conduct legal abortion.

A ten-year-old girl was made pregnant by an uncle who authorities said had abused her since she was six. Although the interruption of a pregnancy in the case of rape is legal, the girl was forced to take a *via crucis* through state institutions to have an abortion. Even after attaining a judicial order, the procedure could not be realized in her state and she had to travel 1,000 kilometers to have the procedure. Religious groups were convoked on social networks to demonstrate at the hospital, local legislators and religious leaders stood at the entrance door to prevent the girl and her mother from entering. They prayed for the life of the fetus and repeatedly shouted “murderer”!

Unfortunately this case of a girl from Espírito Santo state is not an exception in a country with high rates of sexual violence³¹, including against children, but points to new forms of instrumentalizing and debating the concept of life, seeing it in a dogmatic manner not interested in scientific arguments (Machado, 2010), based on a religious truth whose power disciplines bodies and creates discourses capable of dehumanizing women by naturalizing their places and opportunities as citizens. For this reason, if this rhetoric was previously fighting at the margins of the state, to reach the center of power, and often seen in the public debate as absurd, it is now made legitimate by federal government positions, and brutal and misogynous state policies³².

I understand that the religious legislators have taken a radical position against precepts of “post-modern culture” (which defends contraceptives, abortion, sexual relations outside of marriage), so that the state exercises techniques of behavioral control and control over policies related to sex, gender and reproduction to produce the “society that they want” and the women that they want. Perhaps that society is composed by the pain of the rapes and sexual violations to which we all are subjected to daily in a patriarchal society, which is ideologically misogynous and that establishes as a woman who “follows the nature that God gave her” (not feminists, lesbians, bisexuals, transexuals, those without children or deviants).

In this sense, the woman in the singular, separated from that which may cause a deviation, theologically and socially becomes a receptacle of semen, a body without desire and will, an exemplary mother, the caretaker of the home, a submissive wife, qualifications that appropriate her self, through means symbolically promoted in society and reorganized and reverberated as the force of truth by religious groups. It is this woman that the Ministry of the Woman, Family and Human Rights of the current government appears to protect³³. Once again, it involves a gender perspective that has strong dialog with the evangelical bases still broadly shaped by patriarchal and fundamentalist readings of the biblical text, which are even used to legitimate violence against women in the name of God (Vilhena, 2011).

31 According to the Commission on the Defense of Women’s Rights in the Chamber of Deputies, 32.916 cases of rape were reported in Brazil from January to November 2018. Nearly 35% involved girls younger than 14 (which by law is considered rape of a vulnerable person). In this group, relatives, people known to the family and friends represent 86.4% of all sexual abusers of girls. Available at <https://www2.camara.leg.br/atividade-legislativa/comissoes/comissoes-permanentes/comissao-de-defesa-dos-direitos-da-mulher-cmulher/arquivos-de-audio-e-video/MapadaViolenciaatualizado200219.pdf> accessed on 11/09/2020.

32 Some counter positions should be highlighted given that no group is cohesive, particularly in the religious field. A broad portion of the Christian population has still publicly positioned itself against the death penalty (Almeida, 2017; Solano, 2018), but has validated the social order through greater police repression from the state (Almeida, 2019) although with reserves (Fundação Tide Setubal, 2019). In the last election they adhered widely to a campaign that defended expanding the right to carry guns, lowering the age of criminal responsibility, and militarizing and giving broad powers to police forces. Nevertheless, the correspondences between religious bases, discourses, mobilizations, adherences and political representations were more complex (Vital da Cunha and Lopes e Lui, 2017). But it must be recognized that according to data from the 2018 elections, Bolsonaro won two-thirds of the valid votes of evangelicals. Yet a few questions must be problematized: were these votes taken because of indications of religious leaders or for other religious reasons? Was this a vote against the Workers Party, considering that other groups, such as Blacks and other social minorities also voted strongly for Bolsonaro? It is thus important to better understand the meanings of the evangelical vote for Bolsonaro, which probably do not contain only a single variable, and certainly not only ideological religious content.

33 The most controversial proposal of the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights was related to the confrontation of pregnancy in adolescence through sexual abstinence and incentives to not begin sexual life precociously. It should be emphasized that few resources available for the year 2020 were used by Damares to fight domestic violence, protect traditional peoples and support the most vulnerable during the new coronavirus pandemic.

Current pasts: evangelical ruptures and reconfiguration in political alliances in Congress

The Evangelical Parliamentary Front has been able to more strongly counter the demands of feminist movements and those of LGBT+ people, influencing the political debate through the dispute over democracy and legality, influencing interactions in Congress, and local elections, including those for executive branch positions. Beginning with the 54th legislature (2011-2015), the Evangelical Parliamentary Front improved its articulation as a block and with other congressional fronts³⁴ in the so-called “*Bancada da Bíblia, do Boi e da Bala*”³⁵ [the Bible, Cattle and Bullet Caucus] to defend the neoliberal agenda of the economic, political and media elite that finance campaigns and political mandates to guarantee that their agendas are approved in the national Congress.

Articulating the rules of Brazil’s political process with partisan demands, social fears and requests from electoral bases, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front, for example, was able, in alliance with the Workers Party government, to install Deputy Pastor Marco Feliciano (Social Christian Party/São Paulo) as president of the Commission of Human Rights and Minorities. Acting according to the agenda of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front and its religious bases, and later, also through accusations against the Workers Party, Feliciano, through this Commission, articulated various conservative positions in contradiction to the Commission’s objectives. Even if the adherence of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front to Workers Party governments had been marked by conflict and contradictions, especially given the greater insertion of identity politics in the government and policies of State, the Evangelical Front came to mobilize religious bases to participate more actively in political spaces for discussion of bills of its interest, making its religious and moral values increasingly resonant in Congress and increasingly challenging the government (Py, 2020a).

The new political articulation of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front through extremist actions gave new impulse to its “moral agenda”, mainly in an innovative and technological manner with a broad reach on social networks. In 2016 the Evangelical Front broke with the Workers Party government and supported the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff. This initiated the construction of a new neoliberal alliance with right-wing parties, with a “massive and unanimous launching of the candidacy of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, as an essential and decisive ally, which made the group now shift to a far-right political spectrum” (Camurça, 2020: 83). Despite occasional support for and participation in more progressive governments, it is not possible to deny the historic evangelical affiliation to religiously and socially conservative positions (Burity, 2018).

In recent elections, not only did the evangelicals support Jair Bolsonaro, but sustained and incorporated the discourse of hate against the Workers Party and the rhetoric of its administrations and of the entire political field of the left, declaring identity politics, social policies and distribution of income, universal school access, etc. as “diabolical representations” (cf. Almeida, 2019).

34 It should be emphasized that only the evangelical group defines itself by religious belonging and is organized in a parliamentary front to act on positions it considers to be a priority. Catholic representatives act in Congress through other strategic mobilizations and only in the current 56th legislature formally organized a Roman Catholic Apostolic Mixed Parliamentary Front. This conservative religious base also participates in fronts such as those in Defense of Life and Family, against Abortion and in Defense of Life.

35 Nomenclature that gained public space and the media that expresses sectors that align to the rightwing political project in Congress, but not all of them. According to DIAP (2014:94), the evangelical, agribusiness and security caucuses are “supra-party groups or informal caucuses which have the purpose of promoting causes, ideas and interests. They organize the debate and seek to influence decisions in support of the public policies they defend”. In this way, legislators accumulate strength within Congress, organize positions and influence other legislators so that their projects of interest are voted on in the commissions and by the full house. Nevertheless, the Federal Supreme Court established a requirement for party fidelity (a rule that allows parties to control votes of their representatives) which came to override legislative fidelity to informal caucuses. DIAP (2014) also reported that in 2015, the Evangelical Front had 75 legislators in the National Congress, the Agribusiness Front 109 and the Security Front 22.

For this reason, the politics of hate also promoted by and through religious bases had effects on the new configuration of Congress, which, despite having an indigenous deputy, more women, a higher number of blacks and young representatives, is considered the most conservative of the past 30 years³⁶. The majority of legislators in the current congress are liberal from an economic perspective, fiscally austere; and conservative from a perspective of values, more to the right on the ideological perspective and recalcitrant in relation to the environment and human rights (DIAP, 2018: 29).

The Evangelical Parliamentary Front of the National Congress in the 56th legislature (2019-2023) had 85 members, 44 of them new, 41 reelected and two who returned to the house. Only 19 were women. The Senate has 7 evangelical senators (DIAP, 2018). Once again, a broad majority are from Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches. It should be emphasized that recently, Pastor Marcos Feliciano of the Podemos [We can] Party/São Paulo, was chosen by Bolsonaro to be the vice-leader of his government and has taken an evangelical agenda to the president through participation in worship services and in church events and through declarations supporting the evangelical segment³⁷.

During the campaign, Bolsonaro's base of support came from leaders of large Pentecostal and Neopentecostal churches, while his government has a strong presence of historic protestants³⁸, particularly Calvinists. Theologist Fábio Py (2020b) affirms that while religious leaders linked to a moral agenda and business-prosperity like Bishop Edir Macedo and Silas Malafaia gain more attention, traditional Protestants, such as Baptists and Presbyterians, have held various government posts, because of two ideological priorities: one that is "legal-educational" and another indicative of "authoritarian policies". They occupy the Ministries of Education, Foreign Relations and of Women, Family and Human Rights, and lead the Coordination of Improvement of Personnel in Higher Education/CAPES, one of the main agencies for support to technology and science in the country.

I understand that the choice of historic Protestants for certain positions is a result of the alignment with the Evangelical Parliamentary Front and with a clearly right-wing policy, because Bolsonaro guides his direction towards them and they wind up supporting the indications of Christians. Given these new connections between religion and politics in Brazil, some authors emphasize the effects of this neoconservatism for the human rights agenda (Lacerda, 2019; Machado and Motta and Facchini, 2018; Machado and Motta, 2019) while other studies examine the meanings of religious conservatisms and their impacts on Brazilian politics and society (Almeida, 2017, 2019; Burity, 2018).

In this context, what will be the position of evangelical groups that support the leaders of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front and that elected and have supported the Bolsonaro government in positions that support the weakening of the welfare state, with an investment in neoliberal individualism and a reduction of labor and social rights? These agendas do not benefit these groups that are mostly poor and who hold more precarious, low-paying jobs. The controversy arises through some finding that perhaps the society desired by a broad majority of Christians is composed of the wills of a single God whose truth provides support and care and not by government policies. More God, less state, may be the slogan of Bolsonaro's campaign in 2022.

36 According to DIAP (2018:30): 210 deputies are in the right-wing, the center-right has 94 deputies, the center has 76, the center-left 60 and the left 73. In relation to the socioeconomic profile, the new Congress has a predominance of professionals and business owners, reaching about two-thirds of the House, while one-third is composed of salaried workers and those with various other activities. In numeric terms, close to 160 are professionals, while 200 are in business and approximately 150 are salaried and conduct various activities.

37 Despite the approximation with the evangelical sectors, Bolsonaro manipulates the religious fields. He affirms that he is Catholic, although he was Baptized in the Jordan River by a pastor of the Assembly of God. He emphasizes the Evangelical identity of his wife, and his devotion to the Virgin Mary. He attends Catholic masses, and evangelical services, and says he is Christian by moral values, thus maintaining fidelity from the religious bases. Bolsonaro commemorated his victory with a prayer from then evangelical senator Magno Malta, who was one of the coordinators of Bolsonaro's campaign (Camurça, 2020).

38 The Lutheran Onyx Lorenzoni was Chief of Staff, Minister of Tourism Marcelo Álvaro Antônio is a member of the Igreja Maranata, the Attorney General for the Federal Government André Luiz Mendonça is a Presbyterian pastor, and the chief minister of the Government Secretariat, General Luiz Eduardo Ramos is Baptist.

Final considerations - The present that destroys the future: a terribly extremist Brazil and not at all evangelical³⁹!

As we saw, since its creation, the Evangelical Parliamentary Front has used interpretive modalities of legal principles to affirm that it is up to religious legislators to propose laws that support a social order, whose cultural base is Christian and informed by a fundamentalist exegetic reading of the Bible. In various moments of parliament, to the degree that they dispute the religious field, the range of evangelicals act in politics together with other religious and conservative groups to combat a supposed “devil’s agenda”.

According to Pereira (2014: 44), Brazil as a nation-state was forged by hegemonic Western interpretive models whose religious ties are expressed in a colonialist, exclusionary and sexist manner. For this reason, two facts must be emphasized. The first is that Christian religious values were never absent from the legislative, political and public debates in Brazil and broadly influence democratic values of the state as well as the political, ethical and social values of the population. The second is that Brazil never experienced a process of political and social secularization or a consolidated welfare state as intensely as some European countries. These two facts are widely raised and discussed in the Brazilian social sciences.

For this reason, the concept of secularism that supports the privatization of the religious in democratic contexts, as an interpretive paradigm of modern reality, is incapable of grasping the strong presence of religiosity in public space. The advent of the Brazilian Republic (1889) separated Church and State, but religiosity and church participation make their presence clear and act not only in private but also in public spaces. While the Brazilian Constitution does not regulate or explicitly mention secularism, it does not establish a relation with any religion. Secularism is implied, but not made clear, therefore, it is in dispute. Especially in a society that has little experience with political and participatory formation and whose democracy still needs to be more democratized and intensified (Souza Santos, 2013).

In this light, the Christian religions have always participated in political decisions. However, the novelty of the years that follow the Workers Party governments is the intensity of the success of the conservative evangelical sectors against the agendas of “fundamental rights” present normatively in the Constitution, and until then maintained as a reference in public space. In Brazil today, an agent of the state can declare they are “terribly evangelical”, affirming that the church occupies politics and legislates in its interest, because “God is above all”.

Perhaps for this reason, the slogan of Bolsonaro’s political campaign – “God Above All!” – is aligned to a Brazilian history marked by the action of religious groups to legitimate their values by presenting them as clauses of bills, public policies and other government pacts (Miranda, 2013). It is necessary to consider this historic and controversial public presence of Christian tradition in the formation and construction of the democratic state and in the social values of our country, while recognizing that the connections between religion and politics have changed.

Since the last elections, we perceived some indications that some of these religious groups conducted a process of ideological formation of their bases that allowed greater capillarity in the propagation of their conservative proposals and ideas, resonating the moral agenda of the Evangelical Parliamentary Front in the churches. This capillarization went beyond the churches, reaching other non-religious, but conservative social groups. For this reason, the social networks were an important tool for promoting that there is “a single truth” for overcoming the fears, afflictions, and apprehension stemming from uncertainties and rapid changes. This same truth is also the route to improving economic, political and social conditions.

³⁹ It is important to indicate that the religious fields include sectors that are not fundamentalist, conservative and extremist, and those that have placed themselves in another theological and political place since the civil-military dictatorship (Dias, 2013; Steil and Toniol, 2012; Montero, 2012). In addition to the ecumenical movement that, despite its immense contradictions, has historically acted to defend democratic values (Duarte, 2017), collective Christian groups have recently organized to discuss secularism and that God should not be used as a political tool in a plural democracy such as Brazil’s.

The biblical verse “Know the truth and the truth will set you free” [John 8: 32], became a motto of the Bolsonaro campaign, which announced the “monoliptic” evangelical truth (merging monopoly and apocalyptic) which they sought to make exclusive in the state and in society.

God is above all and “there is only one truth” is the new social pact of a state whose political project places a centrality in God – who is white, male, heterosexual, a provider, who possesses and controls women, the head of a traditional family – who publicly appears to be authorized to not recognize the rights of social pluralities. The effects of this participation, not because they are religious conservatives, but because they base themselves on truths that validate extremist actions that do not recognize these pluralities, can be perverse for the agenda of strengthening and expanding the democratic state of law. And also for the sciences, knowledges and education.

For this reason, I believe that there is no fakery or distraction in the public speech of agents of the Bolsonaro government, especially when they raise a moral agenda, given that Brazil is a country of low democratic intensity and high fundamentalist religious intensity that has consequently slipped in the process of construction of a broad and participatory democracy. The effects of this anti-politics that describes itself as “terribly Christian” may be perverse because it uses the political structure of the state and benefits from it, while it criminalizes and demonizes issues raised by its political adversaries. In this situation, politics has been attacked, democracy drained of meaning and the state reduced by its own political agents to solidify the moral and religious values forged by representatives of “the majority of the population” allied to a highly liberal and individualist economic agenda as the core of this new Brazil.

As Machado and Motta (2019) affirm, the advance of intolerant, authoritarian conservatism is not restricted to Brazil but appears here as the voice of a past to be revived and marked by order, hierarchy, morality, traditions and proper behavior. In this context, for Machado and Motta, anthropology is provoked and questioned by this new conservatism whose political adhesions are strongly engendered through social networks, occupying politics to bar new discussions, concepts and social proposals, especially to oppose an expansion of rights in support of social diversities⁴⁰.

For anthropology, as a social science and political insertion, the challenge remains to create new forms of approximation and dialog with these fears and social uncertainties and the truths and forces proclaimed by religious groups whose moralizing precepts have historically formulated subjectivities, experiences and social and political constructions of the broad majority of the Brazilian people with which we are politically concerned. The epistemological presumption of anthropological studies consider subjects, with their territories and ways of life, as citizens who have the right to demand that their diversities be considered by the state. Politically, through our ethnographies, we can support the defense of human rights and the understanding of human diversities, correlated to cultural traditions. And we can analyze the political challenges in relation to persistent inequalities, violences and social, racial and gender injustices. But, what is the reach of our presumptions and contributions for lay society in general?

Anthropological work has been criminalized recently in Brazil and criticized by religious agents (Machado and Motta, 2019). Our studies point to the need for a democracy that is not abstract, but concrete and plural and that guarantees the right to exist and disagree, without being eliminated or ignored as a citizen. Anthropological studies are constantly facing the challenge of continuing to place the political rights of diversities on the agenda, even under governments with projects for state and society that seek to pacify conflicts and erase differences. We are also confronted in these cultural wars by a government that chooses to be antidemocratic and anti-anthropological.

⁴⁰ The Brazilian Anthropology Association (ABA), through its directories, Human Rights Commission and Committee on Gender and Sexuality, has accompanied the problematics presented in this article, and others, and has raised discussions and encouraged academic, institutional and political production. It has used public spaces to defend sexual and gender diversities, the rights of women and Indigenous peoples, quilombola residents and others traditional peoples and communities.

The new facet of participation of Christian groups, both conservative evangelicals and Catholics in various spaces of politics, congregates many people beyond political leaders in legislatures and federal, state and municipal executive branches, who understand that they are exercising their right to political citizenship, which perhaps they never had the chance to do before, even in progressive, scholastic or scientific spaces. Moreover, their rhetoric affirms that those who are not aligned with their positions do not have rights, besides that, demonstrate a strong disdain for the sciences and secular and critical scholastic knowledge.

In this way, these new imbrications between religion and politics made by the Evangelical Parliamentary Front and its bases, but not only by them, must be seriously analyzed and considered. Above all, they should provoke reflections by anthropologies of religions, politics and gender so that we can promote partial relativisms capable of communicating with the conservative portion of the population and also hearing the other diversities that occupy the religious field that will perhaps allow us to repopulate, not only our ethnographies, but our political beliefs.

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