

“Brazil Above Everything. God Above Everyone.” Political-Religious Fundamentalist Expressions in Digital Media in Times of Ultra-Right Populism in Brazil

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This article aims to (1) describe the basis of the relationship between religion and politics in the ultra-right government of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, locating it in the context of the advances of political-religious fundamentalisms in Latin America; (2) analyze the place of media in this relationship, with special attention to the religious discourse disseminated by Jair Bolsonaro in his social media accounts. The theoretical framework on fundamentalisms, populism, and the relationship between media, religion, and politics gives support to the method of content analysis applied to Bolsonaro’s social media posts during the period of Easter 2020. With these bases, the article is developed in three parts: (1) The advance of political-religious fundamentalisms in Latin America; (2) Political-religious fundamentalisms and populism under the Jair Bolsonaro government in Brazil; (3) The populist communication of the “Messiah” Bolsonaro.

Keywords: fundamentalisms, populism, digital media, evangelicals, Brazil

In his first speech after the election results, on October 28, 2018, Brazilian president-elect Jair Bolsonaro cited God several times and explained the slogan “Brazil above everything. God above everyone”: “I went to the toolbox where one can find the tools to fix man and woman, that is, the Holy Bible. We went to John 8:32: ‘And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free’” (“Bolsonaro Afirma,” 2018, para. 14). From that moment onward, every month in Bolsonaro’s government has only reinforced the unprecedented alliance with a significant portion of Brazilian evangelicals.

By “evangelicals,” this study refers to the non-Catholic and non-Orthodox Christians. According to the 2010 National Census (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2013), the last official data available, Christians represent 86.8% of the population. This Christian population can be broken down into two segments: Roman Catholics, representing 64.6% (9.27% down from the 2000 Census), and Protestants, 22.2% (6.4% up from the 2000 Census). Estimates for the 2020 Census (suspended until the conclusion of this article due to the effects of COVID-19) indicate that evangelicals will exceed 30% of the population.

Three examples, among the many available, illustrate Bolsonaro’s growing proximity to the evangelical sector. In October 2019, he declared, through a videoconference at the 3rd Conservative

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National Symposium, held in the state of São Paulo, that he would be preparing changes in national cultural agencies. "We will not persecute anyone, but Brazil has changed. We will not use public money for a particular type of activity. This is not censorship. This is preserving Christian values," he said ("Bolsonaro Diz," 2019, para. 3).

Two months earlier, in August, Jair Bolsonaro made overtures to the conservative evangelical segment, arguing that the president of the Ancine (National Film Agency) should be an evangelical who could "recite by heart 200 biblical verses with bruised knees, kneeling and walking with the Bible under his arm" (Brant, 2019, para. 4).

The profile of the ministerial cabinet is another strong example that clearly reflects this relationship between Bolsonaro's government and the evangelical religious segment. Of the 23 ministerial portfolios in 2021, there are six cabinet ministers linked to historic evangelical churches: Pastor Damares Alves (Woman, Family, and Human Rights—the insertion of the terms "woman" and "family" by Bolsonaro's government is already a deal with the segment), Pastor André Mendonça (Justice), Pastor Milton Ribeiro (Education), Luiz Eduardo Ramos (Government Secretariat), Fabio Farias (Communications—specially created for the segment as a treat to the religious owners of broadcast media), and Onix Lorenzoni (Presidential General Secretariat). In other words, 25% of the ministerial portfolios are occupied by evangelicals identified with conservative theology and political positions.

It is the case that the evangelical vote weighed heavily on the outcome of the 2018 national elections and remains an important social base for the federal government as it has faced numerous political crises since its beginning and has failed to promote popular policies.

This close relationship between the candidacy, and the consequent ultra-right government of Jair Bolsonaro, and conservative evangelicals is linked to the advance of political-religious fundamentalisms not only in Brazil but also in Latin America, at least in the last two decades. This is reflected in the use of religion and its symbols in Bolsonaro's discourse.

Faced with this situation that challenges studies in media, religion, and politics, this article aims to (1) describe the basis of this relationship between religion and politics in the ultra-right government of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, locating it in the context of the advances of political-religious fundamentalisms in Latin America; (2) analyze the place of media in this relationship, with special attention to the religious discourse disseminated by Jair Bolsonaro in social media accounts.

To achieve these aims, the results of the research coordinated in 2020 by the author of this article and promoted by the South American Ecumenical Forum of the ACT Alliance in Latin America and the Caribbean, entitled "Fundamentalisms, crisis of democracy and threat to human rights in South America: Trends and challenges for action" (Cunha, 2020) will be taken as a primary basis. This theoretical basis is a reference to the method of content analysis applied to Bolsonaro's social media posts during the period of Easter 2020.

With these grounds, the article is developed in three parts: (1) the advance of political-religious fundamentalisms in Latin America; (2) political-religious fundamentalisms and populism under the Jair Bolsonaro government in Brazil; (3) the populist communication of the "Messiah" Bolsonaro through social media.

The Advance of Political-Religious Fundamentalisms in Latin America

The term "fundamentalism" is not new and is loaded with new meanings according to different historical contexts. Born among Protestant Christians in the United States, as a reaction to modernity and its effects on Christian theology, during the 1960s, "fundamentalists" meant "separatists" and were no longer related to the conservatives of the historical churches, not even the Pentecostals. The exception was the Southern Baptist Convention, which had a large proportion of militant conservatives called "fundamentalists," especially by its critics (Marsden, 1991).

In the 1970s, a process of recovery of "evangelicalism" began, as a factor of unity and transition. The term "fundamentalism" took on new meaning. Heirs of fundamentalism of the early 20th century, prominent figures such as pastors Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, and Pat Robertson, with ample financial resources and access to radio and TV, were organizing to retake America for Jesus. It was a time of greater political activism with an approach to the Republican Party, the formation of pressure groups, lobbies, articulations such as the "Moral Majority," and the new Christian right, led by Jerry Falwell, around the pro-life and pro-family agendas.

The Moral Majority was strengthened in the 1980s, but it was in the 1990s that it gained more space with Republican president Ronald Reagan. Fundamentalist leaders had been appointed to important positions (Rocha, 2002). This occupation of the Republican Party allowed fundamentalists to be empowered each time the party assumed the highest position in the state. The fundamentalist force was resumed in the Bush years (father and son) and during the Donald Trump administration, and came to be considered as the ultra-right. Cultural war and dominion theology are the contemporary versions of fundamentalism through the reformist and reconstructionist currents (Diamond, 1995; Souza, 2017).

The term "fundamentalism" became popular during the Iranian (Islamic) revolution in the late 1970s, which was classified by analysts and news media as fundamentalist in the form of traditional militant religion (Marsden, 1991). Years later, at the dawn of the 21st century, the popularized meaning was resumed, when it began to be used intensively by the news media, all over the world, after the events of September 2001, in the United States, as a classification of the extremely violent actions taken by radical Islamic groups. For that, a negative image of Islam was established, as, practically, synonymous with fundamentalism. The popularization of the term made it equivalent to radicalism and extremism.

With the rise of conservative Pentecostal groups and their presence in politics, from the 1980s in Latin America, the term "fundamentalism" was brought back by progressive religious scholars, political left-wing, and newsy media analysts.

At this point, it is relevant to turn to the sociologist Alexandra Ainz (2011), who considers that "fundamentalism consists in very concrete ways, first of interpreting reality [worldview] and then of acting

on this interpretation" (p. 165). For Ainz (2011), the interpretation of reality is made from a religious matrix, and action is linked to the political dimension, both being confluent and mutually conditioned.

Therefore, considering that the term "fundamentalism" is a concept that is in continuous reconstruction in the face of sociohistorical transformations, a theoretical synthesis assumes the term "fundamentalism" in the plural to understand the political-religious expressions that manifest themselves in the opposite direction of democracy and human rights in Latin America. Fundamentalisms are understood thus as a world vision, an interpretation of reality, with a religious matrix, combined with political actions resulting from it, for the weakening of democratic processes and of sexual, reproductive rights and traditional communities, policies of valorization of plurality and diversity, in mutual conditioning (Cunha, 2020).

Political Revitalization of Religion

Brazil is facing a religious-political phenomenon, which Jürgen Habermas (2007) already observed in the early 2000s in the United States and calls "political revitalization of religion." It represents the downfall of the modern Enlightenment idea that secularization would privatize religion, definitively eliminating it from the public sphere. In a dialogue with Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), Habermas calls this political revitalization of religion "post-secularization" (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2007), a phenomenon in which societies are characterized by the constant presence of religion in the public sphere despite the process of social and cultural modernization they have experienced. This phenomenon is the result of a discourse on the sacred that preserves the motivational aspect of its religious contents and contributes to the maintenance of social integration, which is therefore achieved not only through the normative dimension of the democratic constitutional state of liberal law.

Although the Catholic presence in politics is a historical mark of Latin America, it was the entrance of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal Protestantism, the popularly called "evangelicals," into the electoral institutional politics of several countries, more intensely from the 1980s, and more recently into noninstitutional politics (activism for agendas in the public arena), with emphasis on Pentecostal groups, which drew attention to this phenomenon. In this context, the Latin American evangelicals left the condition of an invisible minority and gained public visibility.

It was the occupation of space in the media that made publicity for evangelical churches possible, the visibility of their presence in social spaces. In the case of Brazil, until the 1990s, if the presence of Christian groups in the media favored the radio and the publications provided and was shy in relation to TV and other electronic media, from that period onward, this picture changed. At the turn of the 21st century, while Catholic groups invested in a greater presence on TV and digital media, pastors and evangelical leaders, primarily in the Pentecostal segment, became media entrepreneurs and holders of what could be called "real empires" in the field of communication, seeking to compete even with historically consolidated nonreligious broadcasting companies. To the point that some Pentecostal groups were born as a mediatic group, that is, interaction with the media has been part of their very reason for being (Cunha, 2016).

Historic cultural and sociopolitical elements have made Brazil—as well as the Latin American continent at large—a fertile ground for fundamentalist expressions. These elements include, among others, the colonialism of Portugal in the 16th century and the military dictatorships (Comissão Nacional da Verdade, 2014), marked by the predominance of authoritarianism. This stems from the structure of society established in the continent, based on three forces imposed by colonialism: Patriarchalism, latifundia, and slavery, embodied in the authority of the White man, great property, and racism. The Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre (2003) explains that the patriarchal formation of Brazil is explained more by its economic foundation, the experience of culture, and the organization of the family, which was the colonizing unit. According to Freyre (2003), the feudal lords were the owners of the land, the owners of the men, and the owners of the women. This established a culture based on patriarchal solidity: The stability of White men supported by the plantations of latifundios and Black people.

These forces compound the different Brazilian social formations by establishing social concreteness, ideologies, and behaviors. They are the bases of authoritarian regimes anchored in machismo, racism, and militarism that hang like a shadow over the politics of several countries. They mark the reality of the continent, at various historical moments, and the tensions that permeate the contemporary democratic construction.

At this point, it is possible to recover the term coined by American philosopher and political theorist Wendy Brown (2006, 2019), "de-democratization," to understand this context in which setbacks in the realization of human rights take place articulated with the conservative re-politicization of the religious field.

Political-Religious Fundamentalisms and Populism in the Government of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil

After the impeachment protocol against Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff, in 2016, articulated and ended the almost 14 years of social liberalism conducted by the left-wing *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT); (Workers Party) and its allied base, the country started to see a set of setbacks in the field of human rights, gender, and labor (Cunha, 2020). This process paved the way for the election of the ultra-right, headed by the military figure of Jair Bolsonaro, to the presidency of the republic in 2018.

Bolsonaro's electoral campaign was marked by an emphasis on the "salvation of the Traditional Family," against corruption, and was fueled by a broad and articulate occupation of social media with the dissemination of false content by its network of supporters. Jair Bolsonaro built the image of an anti-gender and anti-communist religious government (Corrêa & Kalil, 2020).

Although maintaining his Catholic identity, as president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro makes explicit the religious alliance with conservative evangelical leaders within and outside institutional politics and has six evangelicals among his cabinet ministers (including the Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights, the Baptist Pastor Damares Alves). There is an uninhibited agenda that updates neoliberal policies, with a denial of human rights, especially the rights of workers, women, LGBTQI+, and traditional communities (indigenous and afro descendants). The practice of destabilizing social and opposition movements with disinformation is a hallmark of the government.

Bolsonaro's Alliance With Evangelical Fundamentalists

Jair Bolsonaro declares himself a Catholic (Nejamkis, 2019), but maintains close alliances with evangelical political leaders. In 2016, while Dilma Rousseff was facing impeachment proceedings, Jair Bolsonaro left the Progressive Party, in which he had served for seven years, and joined the Social Christian Party. The shift in political affiliation was framed by a religious ritual: The retired captain was baptized in Israel in the waters of the Jordan River at a ceremony held by the party's president Pastor Everaldo. The episode led many Christian believers to believe that the deputy had converted to the evangelical faith. Bolsonaro's candidacy for the presidency thus found support among this religious group as well as the Catholics who identified with the ultra-conservative, ultra-right agenda (that includes nationalism, xenophobia, racism, and homophobia). His campaign was characterized by calls to the end of urban criminality and the salvation of families from an alleged "gay and feminist dictatorship." This religious support held firm during the first year of Jair Bolsonaro's term (Burity, 2019).

As a candidate, Bolsonaro developed a strong communication strategy that fed directly into his own political agenda and held strong appeal among conservative evangelicals, centering on the protection of the traditional family, heteronormative ideals, and control over women's bodies. Many evangelicals have come to imagine Bolsonaro as the country's most powerful leader, supporter of the evangelical agenda, who is, at the same time, a "simple man of the people who speaks his mind." This seems to have been the driving force behind Jair Bolsonaro's evangelical vote even if he has never hidden that he has been married three times, is a violent figure, and frequently uses bad language (Brum, 2019).

Pondering all this, it is important to look beyond the simplistic idea that evangelical leaders ordered those faithful to the church to vote for Bolsonaro. In the case of the 2018 elections, it is crucial to consider the type of ideals that would prove decisive in winning over the conservative evangelicals.

One must therefore look more closely at the evangelical worldview and culture to understand why *bolsonarismo* would be successful with that part of the population. One key element is the sexual morality based on puritan Protestant theology, which denies the corporal and sexual dimension of men and women (Alves, 1979). The result of this worldview is the submission of women to the power of the male/patriarch (father, husband, brothers, uncles, sons, pastor), the repression of the body, and the condemnation of homo-affectivity.

There is also the notion of engaging in war with one's enemies (Cunha, 2013). This warfare theology, with its notion of a bellicose God and the Lord of Armies, has been historically present among the fundamentalist strain of Brazilian evangelicalism. The Roman Catholic Church has always been identified as just such an enemy, to be fought in the symbolic battlefield as well as the physical and geographical. Likewise, Afro-Brazilian religions also play the role of the enemy. Communism and related progressive politics have played the part of a central enemy, to varying degrees.

Beginning in 2010, when evangelical leaders began to pose a radical opposition to Dilma Rousseff's candidacy as president, this list of enemies was updated: Any person, group, or party that defended gender justice was regarded as a threat to both the traditional family and evangelical sexual morality.

Fundamentalist evangelical discourse teaches "spiritual warfare," with the notion that enemies of the faith, the incarnation of evil powers, must be constantly fought. This discourse mirrors the language preached by Jair Bolsonaro in his moral crusade (Lima & Chaloub, 2021).

This evangelical-political alliance also carries strong repercussions for religious groups that have been working to expand their influence over the political process in all branches of the Brazilian state: Executive, legislative, and judicial.

Under Bolsonaro's presidency (2019–2022) there were eight evangelicals in the upper echelons of the federal government, apart from the significant number of appointments to lower-ranked positions, known to be the guardians of the ideological agenda of the government.

Populism: A Political-Religious Fundamentalist Resource

In Brazil, "populism" is a political component that crossed the 20th century. Until the 1950s, the notion had a positive connotation in academic studies, as a synonym for popular. From that period, with intense studies on the political dimension assumed in the country as populisms, it gained pejorative meaning. In Angela de Castro Gomes' (2001) research, three elements that constitute the construction of the concept of populism in the country are indicated: (1) the existence of a proletariat without class consciousness; (2) the context of a ruling class in a crisis of hegemony; (3) the emergence of a charismatic leader.

Along the same perspective Francisco Weffort (1989), studying the 1950s Brazil and the military dictatorship that followed from the 1960s and lasted for 21 years, uses the notions of "repression, manipulation and satisfaction" to understand how "populism" has consolidated itself as a form of making politics in Brazil from the second half of the 20th century. In this sense, the articulation of state repression with the political manipulation of the masses and the satisfaction of workers when some of their demands were met would give rise to the "populist pact."

On the other hand, authors such as Ernesto Laclau, understand populism from another angle, not "in consequence, an expression of the ideological backwardness of a dominated class, but, on the contrary, an expression of the moment when the articulatory power of this class imposes itself hegemonically over the rest of society" (Laclau, 1979, p. 201). For Laclau (2005), "populism would not necessarily imply cynical or instrumental manipulation by politicians. Thus, populism is not characterized as a 'fixed constellation,' but as an arsenal of rhetorical tools ('floating signifiers') that can have the most diverse ideological uses" (p. 237). In that sense, populism is a political logic. Hence populism can also be attributed to the left-wing political tendency, embodied in Brazil, especially in recent decades, by the government of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva (PT).

New research on contemporary political phenomena has shown that populism should be defined in ideational terms, a conception that is close to the discursive definition defended by Latin Americanists, especially under Laclau's approach. Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) point to the existence of populism

as part of a larger typology of discursive frameworks, including pluralism (in which people reject a Manichaean outlook and see the good in their political opponents) and elitism (which inverts populism's outlook by celebrating the virtues of the elite and the fallibility

of the masses). According to this ideational conceptualization, the organizational features of populist movements and their structural preconditions are contingent aspects, which sometimes but not always accompany populism. (p. 514)

From this conceptualization emerges a list of six criteria that represent essential dimensions of populist discourse: (1) a Manichaeian view of politics and the world; (2) the use of cosmic proportions to emphasize moral significance and justify arguments; (3) exaltation of the "will of the people," the "people" as a legitimate source of moral and political authority; (4) labeling minorities or the opposition as the enemy, as being evil; (5) arguments in favor of a systemic change often expressed as "revolution" or "liberation"; (6) adopting an "anything goes" approach toward the "enemies."

A study led by Team Populism, a team of scholars from Europe and the Americas, analyzed Bolsonaro's 10 speeches from official campaign events and Facebook livestreams during his electoral campaign in 2018 (Tamakia & Fuks, 2020), applying the criteria of the ideational conceptualization. The Team Populism's analysis focuses on three of them: (1) the praise of the popular will or the "people"; (2) the framing of an elite as corrupt and selfish; and (3) a Manichaeian view of politics and the world.

The study demonstrates that the idea that "Brazil is ours" (discourse that includes Bolsonaro himself as part of "the people"), that "we can change Brazil," was remarkable in his presidential campaign and permeated his first year of government. Besides people-centrism, in his campaign discourses, according to Team Populism (Tamakia & Fuks, 2020), Bolsonaro openly acknowledged the opposition (the left and PT) as his enemies, addressing the PT government as corrupt, inefficient, and responsible for executing a plan to spread its ideology while in power. Also, Bolsonaro holds PT accountable for the undermining of the traditional family and its values. Bolsonaro uses belligerent language when addressing PT, becoming more aggressive as the elections approach, and openly defends nondemocratic means to defeat his political enemy. Another aspect identified in Bolsonaro's discourses is a moral distinction between those who "defend the traditional family and values" and those who oppose it, "good vs. evil." He uses certain expressions (e.g., "our side and their side," "good citizens") that clearly communicate a moral division.

Based on this approach, it is possible to identify elements that relate Bolsonaro's populism to the ultra-right wave that has fueled populism in the world during the second decade of the 21st century (Bianchi, Rangel, & Chaloub, 2021). A coincidence has fueled this image of Jair Bolsonaro: The presence of the name Messiah (Messiah) in his full name "Jair Messiah Bolsonaro," supports the idea that he was predestined, since birth, to "save the Brazilian nation," as the last part of this article will show (Azevedo & Bianco, 2019).

Bolsonaro's government motto is a powerful example. "Brasil over everything" is not a new nationalist saying but is reconstructed from another one of the Brazilian military in the late 1960s, during the dictatorship, which was also a recreation from a third one. The motto was chosen by an ultranationalist grouping of paratroopers called Centelha Nativista (Nativist Spark), which emerged to work for the radicalization of the repression during the dictatorship in Brazil. The expression had strong connections with the "Germany above all else" line from the German national anthem abused by the Nazi régime (Chirio, 2012).

Bolsonaro's nationalism, based on facing the growth of an anti-left sentiment within Brazilian society, fostered a new ultra-right nationalism, as mentioned above. The discourse is based on the greatest

enemy, which, according to Bolsonaro's understanding is communism—an evil that has always surrounded the country and the world, and, in Brazil, would have been dissipated by the military dictatorship but recovered by the left in power since 1985.

The populist campaign rhetoric was strengthened in government actions during Bolsonaro's first year in power. First, he developed an image of a simple and popular person, approaching the "common man," appearing in public in informal clothes (Figure 1), expressing himself using bad words in press interviews, and expressing disobedience to preventive measures of social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The practice adopted by Bolsonaro of receiving ordinary people at the entrance to the presidential residence on a specific day of the week for photographs and a brief dialogue also represents the reinforcement of this image of "man of and for the people."



Figure 1. Bolsonaro in flip flops at an official meeting (Amado, 2019).

The strongest expressions of this image of the "common man" are given in social media: The program of informal livestreaming on social media, every Thursday night, to present ideas and plans to the public. Also, the frequent social media posts in which Bolsonaro exposes himself at home watching sports on TV or at mealtime, with a table set up with very popular items and utensils (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Bolsonaro makes coffee in the old style on a messy kitchen sink (Bolsonaro, 2018).

With regard to government actions, populist positions appear in the forwarding of public policies that aim to respond to commonsensical demands such as the end of daylight-saving time, the reduction of punishment for bad drivers, and the reduction of speed cameras on highways. There is the promise to put an end to crime with laws to increase the population's armament, among other policies that aim to meet supporters' wishes, which Bolsonaro designates as the "end of PT policies."

The main dimensions of populism are present in Jair Bolsonaro's approach to politics with the additional element in his populist communication, that is, the use of religion and religious values. The next section will focus on the characteristics of this populist communication and its relationship with religion.

The Populist Communication of "the Messiah" Jair Bolsonaro Through Social Media

In 2018, Brazil elected an ultra-right president, who speaks openly against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and other (LGBTQI+) population, women, Black people, and indigenous rights movements (among other minorities), defends arms ownership, and praises the military regime, to the point of condoning torture. In a climate of polarization against the left, and particularly against the 14 years of government of the PT, in the second presidential round, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, of the Social Freedom Party, obtained 55.13% of the valid votes, against 44.87% of the runner-up, Fernando Haddad, from PT. With the populist discourse assumed by Bolsonaro, anti-popular proposals already implemented by the interim government of Michel Temer (2016–18) were put into practice, under the notion of "legitimacy of the ballot boxes."

Bolsonaro can be considered a Brazilian politician who succeeded at the polls driven by the Internet, mainly by social media. As developed in this article, this does not mean that the victory of the retired captain occurred solely because of political actions on social media. Conservative ideas that guided the *bolsonarista* campaign were already present in the country, in the process of revitalization, and were anchored in the colonialist culture of patriarchy, latifundium, and racism.

However, to be elected president, Bolsonaro, called a "myth" by supporters, needed extensive exposure in the media (Cesarino, 2019). Having served as a federal deputy for more than 30 years with no relevant projects, Bolsonaro's visibility was restricted to participation in sensationalist TV programs and

humor programs. Controversial phrases were the basis for television attractions that sought audience at all costs. Few believed that the caricatured figure, ridiculed in these programs and in discussions about controversial media celebrities, would be elected president of the republic.

By boosting anti-left and anti-PT sentiment among Brazilians, which led to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016, Brazil's main media groups indirectly helped to leverage Bolsonaro's popularity and populism. He channeled the feeling of indignation against PT. This feeling was based on "hatred," and not on rational arguments, precisely to draw the attention of the adherents to anti-PT. With negative coverage by the major media, Bolsonaro found social media—especially Twitter and instant messaging via WhatsApp—to be the vehicles that carried his political agenda to millions all across Brazil.

False news and misinformation became a staple in the electoral campaign and remained so during Bolsonaro's government. The support won by populist logic with the constitution of *bolsonarismo*, has given rise to an army of followers ready to defend the "myth." If a press organ publishes an article that sounds unpleasant, it will soon be classified as "communist" or as a follower of "cultural Marxism." If there are news favorable to the "myth" or negative about the opponents, they will soon be shared extensively on social media, regardless of the veracity of the content. That is how Bolsonaro's popularity was achieved during the elections and remained leveraged since his coming to power despite the fact that these years have been filled with political failures, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is in this sense that the political-religious fundamentalist discourse assumed by Bolsonaro, to maintain the alliance with his privileged group of allies, evangelicals, and conservative Catholics, was consolidated. This can be verified through content analysis of Jair Bolsonaro's social media posts.

The use of language that responds to fundamentalist political-religious demands (valuing the Bible as a rule of faith and fighting enemies) and the use of Christian religious symbols demonstrates how *bolsonarista* populism is based on religion. For that, a methodology scope was defined for this study: The communication by Bolsonaro via his accounts on social media during the period of Easter 2020, known in Christian tradition as the Holy Week, from Palm Sunday (April 5, 2020) until Easter Sunday (April 12, 2020).

The populist recourse to religion by Bolsonaro was intensely evident during that period, particularly marked by the advance of the coronavirus pandemic in the country. In early April 2020, popularity surveys reported that Bolsonaro was experiencing a strong drop in acceptance by the population, with an average of 30% that evaluated his government as bad or awfully bad, in an upward curve. He was demarcating the discourse of relativizing the quarantine as a preventive resource to the pandemic, having called the disease a "little flu," in an official pronouncement in March while the numbers of the infected and the dead considerably increased, having reached 10,361 confirmed cases on April 4 and 445 deaths. It was at this moment that the intensification of the religious discourse of the president of Brazil was verified, in a clear recourse to maintaining the support of his religious basis.

A survey by the Quaest Institute (Gelape & Spagnuolo, 2020) showed, in March 2020, how effective Bolsonaro's strategy was in mobilizing his constituency. According to the survey, the statement that the press was exaggerating in covering the coronavirus crisis had more agreement among the elderly (30%), the rich (27%), and the evangelicals (27%).

The survey presents a portrait of the group on which the government's support basis for the population is concentrated and, from the point of view of religious adherence, reaffirms the place of evangelicals as the lifeline of a party-less president (Bolsonaro had left the *Partido Social Liberal* [PSL]; [Social Liberal Party] in 2019 and was linked to a new party only at the end of 2021), disconnected from the National Congress, and marked by a lack of project and roughness.

Based on these findings, this study proceeds with an analysis of the populist communication actions adopted by Bolsonaro, who made instrumental use of the Christian religion, with a more emphatic appeal to the evangelical public. The study applied the content analysis method in a corpus formed by a selection of Bolsonaro's social media (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) posts during Easter 2020 (from Palm Sunday, April 5, to Easter Sunday, April 12). The instrumentalization of religion in the populist discourse of Jair Bolsonaro has been a frequent practice since the 2018 election campaign, however, the corpus of Easter was defined for the purposes of this study because of the strength of the symbolism of this period to the Christian calendar and because it was the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, with an increasing advance in the number of infected people and deaths.¹

The Call for a National Fast

It was in this atmosphere that, in the days leading up to Holy Week, Bolsonaro called for a national fast for Palm Sunday. The call came after Bolsonaro received such a suggestion from a group of pastors at the entrance to his residence. On the same day, in an interview on a radio program, the president reaffirmed the "summons" as an act against the new coronavirus:

I am a Catholic and my wife is evangelical. It is a request from these people. I am asking for a day of fasting for those who have faith. So we will, soon, together with the pastors, priests and religious leaders to announce it. To ask for a fast day for all the Brazilian people in the name, obviously, that Brazil will be free of this evil as soon as possible. (Soares, 2020, para. 1)

¹ The Brazilian theologian Fabio Py (2020) classifies the use of the Christian religion in Bolsonaro's discourses as an expression of "christofacism," a term created by the German feminist theologian Dorotee Stole. Py (2020) presents what he calls seven orchestrated acts during Easter 2020, which culminated in the construction of the "bolsonarista Easter myth," to refer to Bolsonaro's authoritarian christology.



Figure 3. Bolsonaro calls for a national fast (Oliveira, 2020).

A YouTube video with messages of evangelical leaders was also disseminated on social media and published by the president himself on his accounts (Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 4. YouTube video frame on national fast (Igreja Batista Getsemani, 2020).

"The greatest evangelical leaders in the country responded to the holy proclamation made by the supreme chief of the nation, President Jair Messias Bolsonaro, and call upon the army of Christ for the largest campaign of fasting and prayer ever seen in the history of Brazil," says an excerpt (Igreja Batista Getsemani, 2020, 0:32). The video opens with a text from the Bible, in 2 Chronicles 20.3: "The king Jehoshaphat decided to consult the Lord and proclaimed a fast in all Kingdom of Judah." Soon after, Bolsonaro appears and says: "Thank you all, and those who have faith and believe, Sunday is the day of fasting" (Igreja Batista Getsemani, 2020, 0:14).

Then, a new excerpt, from 2 Chronicles 20.15, is read: "Do not be afraid or frightened because of this great crowd; for the battle is not yours, but God's" (Igreja Batista Getsemani, 2020, 0:23). The images induce one to think that the king (the president) is the one who must stand before him, like Jehoshaphat, so that God responds to the needs of the people; in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fasting is a common practice not only for Christians (Catholics and Protestants) but also for various religions present in Brazil. The publicity of the campaign, however, highlighted the adhesion of the "greatest evangelical leaders in that country" to the "holy proclamation." The call for participation of the believers was made by 34 religious leaders shown in the video, fundamentally outstanding leaders of Pentecostalism,

some unknown, and a few among a variety of historical evangelicals. No Catholics appeared in the production. There were no mentions from other religions. In fact, all leaders in the video are identified with ultra-conservative speeches and postures. This communication made evident the *bolsonarista* alliance with the fundamentalist evangelical current.

The Momentum of the Roman Catholics

On April 8, Bolsonaro received a group of Catholics in front of his residence. They wielded an statue of Our Lady of Fatima and gave it to the president (Figure 5). The pilgrims said to Bolsonaro: "We brought the image of Our Lady of Fatima, because it will free Brazil from communism. Because these errors are coordinated by us Roman Catholic apostles" (Bolsonaro, 2020a, 0:15), in clear exposure of the conservative Catholic current critical of political actions evaluated as progressive, of Pope Francis, and the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil.



Figure 5. Video frame with a group of Catholics in front of Bolsonaro's residence (Bolsonaro, 2020a).

The image was disseminated throughout Brazil in the news media, and the video of the meeting was shared on the president's social media accounts.

On the same day, Bolsonaro made an official statement on the radio and TV chain, wishing "everyone a Good Friday for reflection and a happy Easter Sunday! God bless our Brazil!" (Planalto, 2020, 4:52). Before that, however, he stated, keeping alive the populist Manichaean view of politics: "I want to deliver a much better country that I received from the successor. Let us follow John 8.32: 'And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'" (Planalto, 2020, 2:20), an excerpt from the Bible that has become a jargon in Bolsonaro's speeches since the 2018 election campaign.

The Image of the Messiah is Activated

In the days when Christians remember Jesus' death and burial, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, Jair Messiah Bolsonaro published two posts, one on each day. In the first, he posted an image reminiscent

of Jesus' crucifixion aligned with a text from the Bible taken from the first Letter of Peter 2.24: "He himself carried our sins on the tree in his body, so that we died to sins and lived to justice, by your wounds you have been healed" (Figure 6).

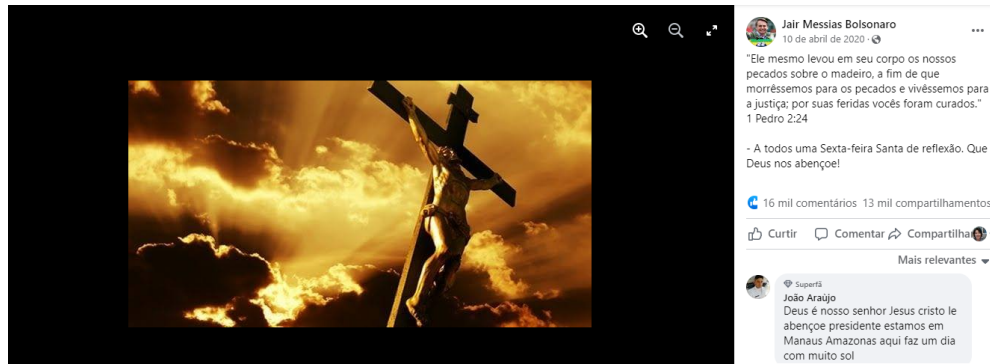


Figure 6. Post on Good Friday (Bolsonaro, 2020b).

On Saturday, the president posted a video recalling the knife attack he suffered in 2018 (Figure 7). He says: "It was the most difficult moment of my life, I just asked God not to leave my seven-year-old daughter an orphan" (Bolsonaro, 2020c, 1:09). The discourse has an evangelical song in the background that says: "History of my life, I fought, I suffered, there were times I got it right, other times I missed it, life is a journey of love and suffering, and the Lord accompanied me all the time." As the music continues, images of the stab are brought in, added to others from the time in the hospital, prayers, and victory in the elections. At the end, an image of the president in a church is inserted, in prayer on his knees.



Figure 7. Extracts of the video posted on Holy Saturday (Bolsonaro, 2020c).

The relationship of the two posts between Jesus crucified and Jair Bolsonaro sacrificed to stab but a survivor is explicit. The message is that the president was "resurrected" as the work of God, to serve the nation. It is the statement that Bolsonaro, who has the Messiah in his name, is the one sent by God to save Brazil, even if a pandemic tries to prevent it.

On Easter Sunday, April 12, Bolsonaro posted another biblical text (Figure 8), which reveals intimacy with the evangelical culture, when selecting a classic, taken from the Gospel of John 3:16: "Because God loved the world so much that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in Him does not perish, but has eternal life" (Bolsonaro, 2020d).



Figure 8. Post on Easter Sunday (Bolsonaro, 2020d).

That same Easter Sunday, the national public TV network, TV Brasil, broadcast live a Bolsonaro meeting with 15 religious leaders—12 Pentecostal evangelicals, two Catholics, and a rabbi—interspersed with musical performances (TV BrasilGov, 2020). After the others' speeches, the president spoke. He started with the recognition of the country's difficult time and went on to the speech about the 2018 stab attack and made an explicit comparison of his trajectory with the resurrection of Christ.

In this discourse, Bolsonaro recognizes himself as the country's savior, calling his election a "miracle," on a path that was being traced by God in his life. He also affirms, using the symbol of the cross: "The responsibility is very great, the cross is very heavy, with millions of people on my side, who have a green and yellow heart, who believe in God, I believe that we can overcome the obstacles" (TV BrasilGov, 2020, 2:09:48).

Bolsonaro's speech also met the guidelines of political-religious fundamentalisms, having affirmed his struggle for "traditional family values" and "against the erosion of military institutions" (TV BrasilGov, 2020). He said he was elected to change a lot and called for another important element in the fundamentalist discourse: Fighting enemies, personified, through his speech, in Venezuela (a country considered communist) and in a large part of the media.

These contents are expressive manifestations of populism as the political logic of Jair Bolsonaro, in which the Christian religion is a resource. They represent significant means for maintaining religious support in times of severe criticism from different political segments and civil society in the face of the negative attitude toward the coronavirus and actions to prevent the intensity of the pandemic. They revealed themselves to be an opportune use of Easter symbols, reverberating messages through social media that meet the demands of religious fundamentalism in evidence in Brazil: Emphasis on the Bible, appreciation of the "traditional family," and confrontation of enemies, represented in the figures of the left, of communism and minority movements.

Conclusion

The rise of the ultra-right in Brazil, enabled by the election of Jair Bolsonaro, is taking place in a global context of growing political conservatism. At the same time, it is a reaction to the advances in public policies allowing for greater social inclusion of the poor and for gender justice, expressed in the advances of political-religious fundamentalisms.

These expressions of fundamentalisms have found a place of refuge in this extremist wave and has enabled, in the Brazilian context, the rise of a religious right with a level of political activity never seen before.

As referenced above, Tamakia and Fuks (2020) have identified expressions of populism in Bolsonaro's speeches during his 2018 electoral campaign. They acknowledge that campaign speeches may be more populist than speeches in government since both frame conditions and external contexts are prone to change. These authors affirm that next step of the Team Populism's research would be an analysis to cover Bolsonaro as president. This article offers a contribution in this direction, as the categories they have used were applied here, through the lens of religion.

The ideational dimension of populism that categorizes the political leader as a warrior to fight the country's enemies is strongly present in the corpus analyzed in the third part of this article. Besides PT and communism, COVID-19 is shown as the enemy and Bolsonaro as the warrior who uses the "weapons of faith." Also, populism around the Manichaeic view of politics is activated against these enemies and against the progressive leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. The populist image of the "common man" who sacrifices himself is also explored by Jair Bolsonaro, who appears in media posts as the one who carries "lot of burden to save the country," the real "Messiah."

Bolsonaro's populist political logic, through a media-heavy sociopolitical and religious dynamic is articulated with this advance of political-religious fundamentalisms. The governmental media campaign, as the corpus studied in this article shows, exhibits the Brazilian president as a loyal Christian, a guardian of puritan religious values, an elected servant of God to save Brazil from its enemies (communists, leftists, feminists, LGBTQI+, Afro descendants, and indigenous movements). This is done through written and visual language that makes use of Christian Bible texts and religious symbols such as the cross and Virgin Mary.

This dynamic leads to a political and cultural tendency that one can no longer ignore or deny: the visibility that religion, primarily Christianity, has attained in the contemporary public spaces in Brazil. This

phenomenon has left an indelible mark on Brazilian sociopolitical, cultural, and religious dynamics, wherein evangelicals have situated themselves in a place of great visibility and formed an apparent unified bloc. Digital media have played an important role in the construction of this reality.

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