

## Article

# Democracy and the Christian Right in Brazil: Family, Sexualities and Religious Freedom

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**Abstract:** Based on data publicly available on various online platforms and in academic literature, this article analyzes the prominent role that the Christian Right has taken in the government of Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2019–2022), including the pandemic period) to strengthen its political–religious project. To this end, we present the ideological mechanisms that align neoconservative Catholics and Evangelicals with both the government’s neoliberal premises and Bolsonaro’s moral communities. We focus on the rhetorical updating of religious freedom to intensify the nationalist narrative of a Christian Brazil, highlighting the judicial expertise that the Christian Right has accumulated in its reactive activism against the pro-rights agenda of LGBTQI+ communities and the advancement of the Pro-Life, Pro-Family agenda. We discuss the anti-gender crusade and “gender ideology” as political instruments of the Evangelical leadership in the process of juridifying public policies related to sexuality, gender, and family, and as a defense of the Christian nation, which it also leads. However, we identify a reconfiguration of the balance in the correlation of forces within Brazilian Christianity.

**Keywords:** Christian Right; Bolsonaro; pandemic; gender ideology; family



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## 1. Introduction

Brazil’s religious landscape in the third decade of the 21st century continues to be predominantly Christian, representing almost 90% or 203 million of the population, as estimated in 2022<sup>1</sup>. According to the 2010 Census, 64% of the population of 190 million declared themselves Catholics (123 million faithful), a decrease from 73% ten years earlier, while the percentage of Evangelicals was 22% (70 million). Experts suggest that by 2030, the percentage of Evangelicals will rise to 30%, with a tendency to stagnate<sup>2</sup>. This confirms the long-discussed trend: the decline of Catholics and the demographic rise of Evangelicals. This Evangelical consolidation will likely be accompanied by a theological shift that encourages the faithful to move from political apathy to confessional participation in party-political representation and a robust internal organization that ensures their participation in fundraising before state bodies.

At the same time, we can observe that in the first two decades of the 21st century, Catholics and conservative Pentecostals worked together to oppose the legalization of abortion, homosexual unions, and sex education in schools, and waged a joint anti-gender crusade against the so-called “gender ideology”, an accusatory slogan against gender studies (Machado 2018; Souza 2014). This coalition represents a shift in the traditional political hegemony of the Catholic hierarchy, as we will discuss.

In this text, we argue that the political alliance of this conservative Christian segment updates the banners of the Christian Right, which, in Conger’s terms (Conger 2019, p. 6), is an analytical category that helps us understand the social movement made up of a complex network of people and organizations in the North American context of the 1970s. Committed to a type of politically conservative Protestantism, the Christian Right has been

reactive to the demands of the feminist and civil rights movements, interpreting them as a cultural war that threatens the traditional family, the ordering of sexuality, and its moral standards, seen as absolute. According to the author, the North American Christian Right has never been a monolithic bloc, but it shares a common way of thinking politically about intervention in the state. Thus, the religious right has been active in the Republican Party for decades and its members have moved through various instances of power, a recent example being Donald Trump's administration (Conger 2019, p. 9).

In Latin America, the circulation of the political and theological discourses of this Christian right found a positive predisposition in the dynamics of the expansion of Protestantism. Villazon (2014, p. 117) interprets that in the 1980s, the processes of religious conversion among Evangelicals offered adherents a type of stability that reinforced hierarchical structures in the family and in faith communities. This religious experience included a vision of the nuclear, heteronormative, patriarchal, and traditional family, generating a sacred cosmos. This would sustain resistance to social and cultural changes among Evangelical Christians, obedient adherence to political authorities (military dictatorships), and the basis for assimilating the pro-family and pro-life discourses of what Villazon calls the new North American Christian Right. At the beginning of the 21st century, the democratic mechanisms activated by social movements to expand sexual and reproductive rights, the legal recognition of homoparental families, and the decriminalization of abortion affected the stable relational world, the heart of the sacred cosmos, of the faithful to the new Christian Right. For the author, the insecurity caused by these changes is the pivot that drives religious actors to pressure other conservative sectors of society to reject the gay agenda and gender ideology (Villazon 2014, p. 122).

In Brazil, the agenda of the Christian Right was preceded by the Catholic Right, which mobilized society to defend the Brazilian family against communism and legitimized the military dictatorship (1964–1985). Cowan (2014, p. 123) proposes that the epicenter of the Evangelical right was moralism based on the family, rather than a counter-cultural reaction to feminism and sexual rights, which brought it closer to the military regime. In the 1980s, during the reconstruction of democratic institutions, the evangelical right adopted a language of acute moral crisis, changed its theological perspective of staying out of "dirty" politics, and entered political representation with the aim of moralizing the arenas of power.

However, the Evangelicals and Pentecostals of the Christian Right in the 2010s are not the same, even though they maintain anti-progress and anti-communism as an active memory. They have aligned themselves with the neoliberal political right and neoconservative groups. The former, in Brown's terms (Brown 2021, p. 93), represents an economic rationality that translates into a hyper-individualized, meritocratic, and entrepreneurial social subjectivity. Neoliberalism opposes the democratic state's intervention mechanisms in the social sphere, commercializes the state's functions, and accelerates the erosion of social rights that have been won. The latter have a "neo" specificity which, according to Vaggione and Machado (2020), among other things, decodes how the values of familism bring together military, business, and ultra-right militant sectors to dismantle the already-fragile democratic structures.

Burity (2022), when referring to neoconservative groups, Evangelicals, and Catholics, identifies them as "guarantors of the De-democratization project" of the secular right, allied to the punitive agenda, the arming of the population, the relaxation of environmental protection legislation, and the radical neoliberalization of the economy and work. In their moral reading of social problems, these religious neoconservatives propose to impose the Christian majority's will as the democratic will, resistant to pressure from minorities and multicultural discourse.

From this conceptual framework, we look at the government of Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2019–2022), whose programmatic, discursive, and performative affinities echoed in the religious and secular media, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bolsonaro managed the humanitarian crisis based on denialism, disinformation, and chaos, which

had devastating effects. In this government, the Christian Right has taken up significant positions. Incredibly, in the midst of the pandemic, it has managed to attach a sense of urgency to its moral agenda.

In this reflection, we have adopted the category of the Christian Right, from Conger's perspective (Conger 2019), as an analytical tool to help us decipher their political–religious activism, given the sense of threat to the established sacred cosmos, in Villazon's terms (Villazon 2014). We have included Catholics and neoconservative Pentecostal Evangelicals in this notion because we believe that when they act together in the current political and religious situation, they constitute an empirical unit.

Our aim is to present the leading role that this Christian Right has taken in Bolsonaro's government, especially during the pandemic period, strengthening its political–religious project to halt the advance of pro-reproductive and sexual rights agendas in the process of democratic dispute over public moralities. To this end, we analyzed the ideological affinities that have brought the Christian Right together with the government's neoliberal premises and Bolsonaro's moral communities, engaged in spreading denialism and disinformation in the secular and religious media. We focus on the rhetorical updating of religious freedom to intensify the nationalist narrative of Christian Brazil, highlighting how this Christian segment has accumulated judicialization experience in its reactive activism to the pro-rights agenda of LGBTQ+ communities and in advancing the Pro-Life, Pro-Family agenda. We discussed the anti-gender crusade and "gender ideology" as a political instrument that makes explicit Evangelical leadership in the process of juridifying public policies related to sexuality, gender, and the family, and as a defense of the Christian nation, which it also leads. However, we identified a reconfiguration of the balance in the correlation of forces in Brazilian Christianity.

Our arguments are anchored in publicly accessible sources on the internet and available in digital format, collected fundamentally during the 2019–2022 periods, and in academic literature. Many of these sources form part of our repository, systematized during the pandemic lockdown, when our research focused on the digital gaze. The set of news and opinion articles was made up of state media outlets and the mainstream press. In selecting the data and information, we followed the assumption that websites and social networks are places of social interaction that are just as valid as offline spaces (Sbardelotto 2012). The data on religious media research are taken from the checks carried out by the progressive collectives Bereia and Intervozes. The analysis of this empirical evidence provides us with elements to think more broadly about how the foundations of democracy are affected by conservative political and religious processes.

First, we present the programmatic, discursive, and performative affinities that have brought the Christian Right closer to the Bolsonaro government and the Bolsonaro moral communities. We then discuss the judicial activism of conservative groups that have updated the rhetoric of religious freedom in defense of the Christian nation. We also analyze the instrumentalization of gender ideology for strategic alliances that could alter the hegemony of the Brazilian Christian scene.

## 2. Discursive and Performative Approaches

Declared in March 2020 and ended in May 2023, the COVID-19 pandemic has represented an unprecedented global health crisis, with countless socio-political, economic, and religious consequences. In Brazil, many of the more than 700,000 lives lost could have been avoided had it not been for the anti-establishment policies of the Bolsonaro government. The management of the pandemic has been characterized by a denial of its seriousness, anti-scientificism expressed in contempt for research institutions<sup>3</sup>, systematic disinformation, a lack of access to consistent data on the progression of contamination, and the dissemination of fake news from within government agencies<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, the blatant ideologization of the pandemic, considered to be of Chinese origin, was understood as a globalist conspiracy of the political left.

Research by the University of São Paulo suggests that the Federal Government, under the leadership of the President of the Republic, has adopted the strategy of chaos as its management of the pandemic, thus ruling out the thesis of incompetence or negligence on the part of the government<sup>5</sup>. Since its inception, the pandemic in Brazil has ceased to be a problem for the executive branch and has become a legal dispute between state and municipal governments<sup>6</sup>. Given the multitude of factors in this complex pandemic scenario, we will focus on two themes: denialism and disinformation, both adopted in government rhetoric by Bolsonaro groups and by neoconservative evangelical and Catholic leaders.

Denialism has been anchored in the disregard for both the seriousness of the pandemic and the importance and effectiveness of vaccination and social isolation by government sectors. According to Miguel (2020, p. 96), Bolsonaro's treatment of the pandemic was a clear example of the cultural production of ignorance by disregarding information from the WHO and the scientific community, insisting on and disseminating anti-science narratives. These narratives have also been translated into religious terms by major media leaders of great impact in the Pentecostal churches, such as Edir Macedo, founder of the Universal Church, who said in a YouTube video, "Those who walk by faith walk ahead. When you see on the news 'so-and-so died, so-and-so had coronavirus', don't look at that, don't read the news".<sup>7</sup> The pastor of the Assembly of God, Silas Malafaia, has systematically minimized the pandemic and disqualified the press and health professionals on his social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube)<sup>8</sup>. According to Guerreiro and Almeida (2021, p. 53), the attitude of religious supporters of the government was to minimize the risks of the pandemic and deliberately use language of denial and anti-science.

Three assumptions of denialism in the public space can be highlighted: the selectivity of false experts who focus on isolated articles that go against the scientific consensus (cherry-picking), the use of misrepresentations or logical fallacies, and the identification of conspirators (Caponi 2020, p. 211). These assumptions overlap with technical, legal, and political language and are the basis for the negationist advance in the social and religious spheres. A report that investigated a religious network of disinformation among Bolsonaro supporters found speeches by evangelical leaders who prophesied that the pandemic would be temporary, others who reinforced apocalyptic catastrophes, and some who promised immunizing holy oil. But the general tone was conspiratorial, such as the one broadcast on the ultra-conservative Catholic channel Instituto Plínio Corrêa de Oliveira, where videos speculated that the pandemic was a great social laboratory in which humanity was purposely subjected to "psychological, revolutionary warfare".<sup>9</sup>

The denialism promoted by the Bolsonaro government has directed its attacks at public universities and "gender ideology", using arguments considered to be valid rational arguments, in parallel and/or even in opposition to scientific production. Anti-intellectual rhetoric has been consolidated as a political strategy<sup>10</sup>. As a production of ignorance, the anti-intellectual rhetoric of Bolsonaro's denialism feeds on an opposition between "us", the simple people, the non-intellectuals, the President, and "them", the privileged, the intellectuals who impose some kind of knowledge. This clash, typically populist, is transferred to the religious sphere and becomes effective in politics. Thus, Pentecostal televangelist Valdomiro Santiago, of the Igreja Mundial do Poder de Deus ("Worldwide Church of God's Power"), offered in a video that circulated on YouTube and on the church's website a cure for the coronavirus by selling bean seeds blessed by him<sup>11</sup>.

If the cultural reproduction of ignorance in the pandemic is best exemplified by denialism, its dissemination has disinformation as its greatest ally as a device for politicizing ignorance, starting with the anti-scientific proposal to claim that there would be an early treatment for the pandemic. In the words of the President, which circulated on the internet via a YouTube video: "(...) I took chloroquine [a drug contraindicated by the UN] and I got away with it, a lot of people took it and got away with it. And that's called early treatment or immediate treatment or off-label treatment". This and three other videos have been removed from YouTube for violating the platform's COVID-19 medical information policies.<sup>12</sup>

There was also Bolsonaro's rhetoric attributing the origin of the COVID-19 virus to China and its spread around the world to a globalist conspiracy by the communist and anti-Christian left. This first claim brought diplomatic impasses that interfered with the purchase of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), essential for the manufacture of vaccines in Brazil, and vaccines from China<sup>13</sup>. The second claim resonated positively among conservative religious leaders as it fueled the anti-vaccine movement, partly because it was associated with the purchase of vaccines manufactured in China<sup>14</sup>. In a mass broadcast live on TV, a priest from one of Brazil's largest charismatic communities preached with suspicion: "It's coming in the guise of a good thing, called the coronavirus vaccine. It's coming in the guise of something beautiful: protection, health, saving lives. Beware that it's just the cover, just the cover".<sup>15</sup> In the same vein, Malafaia questioned whether "people would become guinea pigs" for international interests and encouraged people not to get vaccinated<sup>16</sup>. It is worth noting that the religious media led by evangelical politicians has grown since 2010 and, in the context of the pandemic, has retraced its path, migrating to interactive media, through which it has disseminated false information about the coronavirus and themes of Christian persecution in China, reactivating the anti-communist debate (Bandeira et al. 2021).

Disseminated through social networks, denialism and disinformation became an arsenal of content produced by the "hate cabinet"—popularly known as the "hate cabinet", judicial investigations have uncovered evidence that it was installed in the government palace and was run by one of the President's sons. It was a group that operated in the official workplace of the President of Brazil under presidential orders to produce and spread fake news. According to the judicial investigation<sup>17</sup>, this office produced articles, memes, YouTube videos, and videos that attacked government opponents, spread fake news, and boosted the government's positive image on the internet<sup>18</sup>, establishing a war of disinformation. This production was echoed on the web of social networks of Bolsonaro groups connected to international networks<sup>19</sup>, also denialist and anti-vaccine, from the European far right<sup>20</sup>.

It should be noted that, under criteria of reliability and ideological affinity, mediated by robotic algorithms emanating from the "hate cabinet" and managed by Bolsonaro's networks, the complexity of the pandemic has been annulled, fact-checking has been prevented, and distrust in science has been fueled. Moreover, disinformation from official government agencies has increased aggression against the press, promoted censorship of journalists, violated the right of access to information, and removed information about the pandemic from public view<sup>21</sup>. In addition to disrespecting freedom of expression and the press, there has been verbal aggression and harassment of journalists, especially women<sup>22</sup>, as a way of discrediting the press. Tension was generated by the systematic opposition to the government by large commercial media such as Rede Globo, CNN, or the state TVCultura, among others, committed to scientific information and critical of the erratic management of the pandemic.

Conversely, a conservative Catholic group made up of charismatic priests, parliamentarians, representatives, and owners of TV networks has asked Bolsonaro for support and investments in order to continue operating. The representative of the largest Catholic TV in the Midwest region of the country, whose founding priest is facing charges of embezzlement<sup>23</sup>, said: "Our reality is challenging because we work with small donations, with low commercialization (...) we need support from the government (...) so that we can continue communicating the good news, bringing knowledge to the Catholic population, the vast majority of this country (...) [spreading] the good that the government can be doing and doing for our people". A gospel priest present at the meeting said: "We want to be in homes and build Brazil. And, more than ever, you [Bolsonaro] know the weight this has when you have negative media. We want to be together with you".<sup>24</sup> In exchange for positive media, Bolsonaro promised to intercede with the Communication Secretariat to speed up resources and concessions for radio and TV stations. The CNBB repudiated the meeting, stating: "The Catholic Church does not bargain. It establishes institutional



relations with public agents and the powers that be, guided by democratic, republican, ethical, and moral values".<sup>25</sup> However, the massive investment support (BRL 30 million) for government advertising campaigns went to five media outlets linked to evangelical church pastors who supported Bolsonaro's election.<sup>26</sup>

This support from the religious media was aided by the production of content that exalted Christian, patriotic, anti-communist, and anti-globalist values. Among the narratives that circulated in religious environments was the one associating the measures to contain the virus with the impositions of cultural Marxism. Popularized by the Brazilian Catholic Olavo de Carvalho (1947–2022), philosopher, astrologer, writer, and Bolsonaro's guru, the expression "cultural Marxism"<sup>27</sup> encompasses a conspiratorial vision in which the values of Western culture, especially religious values, are destroyed by the political left and by academics and intellectuals.<sup>28</sup>

On the Catholic scene, the conservative Olavo de Carvalho has two unconditional disciples: the priest Paulo Ricardo de Azevedo (1967) and the digital influencer Bernardo Küster (1988). The former enjoys prestige as an intellectual formator of seminarians and online catechist, famous for being photographed with a rifle in his hand next to Carvalho, and Bolsonaro, and has been offering courses on cultural Marxism and gender ideology for over a decade<sup>29</sup>. The journalist, YouTuber, and filmmaker, who has been the subject of a judicial inquiry for spreading fake news and threatening the Supreme Court<sup>30</sup>, has released a documentary (2022), "They are among us", with the special participation of Olavo de Carvalho. In both characters, the antagonist to conservative Catholicism (the left, Marxism, socialism, globalism, progressivism) is constructed in a game of mirrors between us and them. For them, there is always an enemy to be defeated, be it the devil, communism, gender, and/or feminism.

In another text (Carranza and Teixeira 2023), we discussed the discursive and performative approximation of these characters and the ultra-conservative Catholic groups to the way in which sectors of Bolsonaro act. In other words, their repertoires of action include intimidation through digital networks, disruption, and the division of the world between us who are right and others who are wrong, whoever is not with me is against me. For Alonso (2019, p. 52), the shared belief in binary codes that divide the world into good and evil, sacred and profane, family people and indecent people, good citizens and ethical and corrupt bandits, nationalists and globalists morally structures the Bolsonaro communities. Undoubtedly, these moral links between the Christian right and the Bolsonaro moral community have been evident in the political and religious denialism and disinformation that have swept through the pandemic.

Within this dispute, between civilizing moralities and religious denialism and misinformation, another battle has been waged: the judicialization of the opening of temples, which brings back the old ghost of religious freedom, this time to defend the Christian nation and its values.

### 3. Neoliberalism, Religious Freedom, and Christophobia: For a Christian Nation

Under the slogan "the economy cannot stop", the Bolsonaro government created a false dilemma for the population: protect themselves with health measures to contain the pandemic, such as lockdowns, or go out to work and expose themselves to contagion. This false dichotomy posited: save lives or save the economy. With their health and daily livelihoods in opposition, the population, especially the most vulnerable, was caught between staying at home, obeying health and scientific authorities, or opposing the legal measures adopted by state and municipal authorities.

Bolsonaro declared, "I'm sure that, with God above all, we'll soon be back to normal. I would like everyone to go back to work, but I'm not the one who decides that; it's the governors and mayors."<sup>31</sup> "With this stance, Bolsonaro began the judicialization of the pandemic—a device that institutions have found to deal with the strategy of chaos<sup>32</sup>—the mobilization of his secular and religious supporters, and the defense of individual freedom.

During the pandemic, pro-Bolsonaro government demonstrations multiplied across the country, despite the Supreme Court's (STF) decrees banning gatherings. The demonstrators protested against Congress and the STF, calling for the repeal of measures to close businesses<sup>33</sup>. Despite Bolsonaro's public declarations not to attend the demonstrations, he encouraged them on social media in the name of personal freedom<sup>34</sup>, stating, "I have never decreed a national lockdown because I know that what is most important among us is our freedom. I would never force you to do what I don't do".<sup>35</sup>

On the side of the government's religious supporters, influential media leaders endorsed the President's positions, such as the Pentecostal René Terra Nova, who acted against social collection and the closure of temples<sup>36</sup>. Many pastors and businessmen protested against the decrees that closed businesses and churches, claiming a "reduction in revenue and excess taxes."<sup>37</sup> A survey by the Intervezes Institute showed that the religious media condemned the lockdowns in Brazilian cities, which were considered inefficient and undemocratic because they violated individual rights.<sup>38</sup>

The opposition between life and the economy was naturalized in Bolsonaro's discourse defending the market "above all else" as a biopolitical strategy for managing the pandemic. This is based on the premises of neoliberalism, for which there is not only the production of goods and services but also ways of being a social subject. Above all, they claim the freedom to take and assume risks, to be entrepreneurial subjects who believe themselves to be absolutely responsible for their successes and failures, without owing or asking anything of the state (Caponi 2020, p. 217). Therefore, an individual right can override broader rights, including collective health. Guerreiro and Almeida (2021, p. 56) point out that "the transposition of individual feelings and practices of a private nature into the public space can produce conflicts and result in the prioritization of particular interests, sometimes violent and hierarchical, to the detriment of the common good".

This logic guided the federal government when it took measures that reduced rights, and Bolsonaro encouraged a return to work, even at the height of the two waves of the pandemic. The religious leaders who defended this view also corroborated the argument that the fight against the new coronavirus should not affect the economy because an economic crisis could be an equal or even greater evil, dichotomizing the preservation of life and the economy.

On the other hand, when state and municipal authorities banned meetings as a measure to contain the virus, conservative religious sectors filed lawsuits to keep temples open, claiming that religious freedom was being curtailed and that their spiritual services were essential. There was no consensus between evangelicals and Catholics, and dissenting voices were heard. A survey by the Datafolha Institute showed that, at the start of the pandemic, 79% of evangelicals wanted the temples open, while among Catholics the figure fell to 47%.<sup>39</sup> The survey also showed that neo-Pentecostal pastors Silas Malafaia and Edir Macedo led the evangelical alignment with Bolsonaro<sup>40</sup>, and that in matters of social isolation, Catholics tended to follow the Vatican's guidelines. Even so, Catholic TV channels spread false information echoing Bolsonaro's positions or nuancing his denialist speeches<sup>41</sup>. Not a few priests insisted on opening their churches, such as influencer Edvaldo Betioli Filho, an admirer of Bernardo Küster and pro-gun, who urged disobeying secular and ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>42</sup>

Two arguments have been put forward to make the case for opening temples and offering spiritual services. The first is the essentiality of the spiritual service, defended by Silas Malafaia: "Are people going to die from the coronavirus? Yes. But if there is social chaos, many more will die. Churches are essential for caring for people in despair, anguish, depression, who won't be cared for in hospitals"<sup>43</sup>, said Malafaia.

The second argument was the defense of religious freedom, bringing up previous disputes with the LGBTQI+ community and the imaginary of Brazil being a Christian nation. The defense of religious freedom led the evangelical sector to engage in reactive judicial activism at the height of the pandemic, mobilizing parliamentarians, religious media, the National Association of Evangelical Jurists (ANAJURE), and senior government

officials. ANAJURE used two channels to raise its allegations to the Federal Supreme Court: the Federal Attorney General, aligned with the Bolsonaro government (soon to become Minister of Justice, known as “terribly evangelical”) and a minister of the Court. The STF ruled in favor of banning the opening of temples and in-person religious activities. From this episode, we are interested in highlighting the argument put forward by the Federal Attorney General:

“The Brazilian Constitution does not condone the absolute closure and prohibition of religious activities, it does not condone discrimination against public manifestations of faith (...) There is no Christianity without community life (...) That is why true Christians (...) are always willing to die to guarantee freedom of religion and worship”.<sup>44</sup>

The expression “true Christians are willing to die to guarantee freedom of religion” echoes directly in the rhetoric of the defense of Christianity, systematically activated by parliamentarians and faithful of the Christian right against demonstrations for the rights of LGBTQI+ communities and against the proposed law criminalizing homophobia (PL672/2019). Since the Gay Parade in São Paulo in 2015, the clash between parliamentarians and the gay community has publicly intensified when a transsexual actress represented the crucified Jesus Christ, denouncing the persecution of sexual minorities by evangelicals<sup>45</sup>. A semantic war broke out over understanding the limits of freedom of expression and legal prohibitions in the name of religious freedom.

In favor of secularism, the judicial authorities contested the arguments of religious parliamentarians and ruled in favor of the transsexual community. Conservative Christians proclaimed persecution of the LGBTQI+ community and popularized “Christophobia”. This persecutory rhetoric is a new accusatory construct that distorts the defense of the Gay community into persecution. Christophobia is the result of conservative evangelicals feeling threatened by the LGBTQI+ community’s demands for sexual and identity rights. The judicial activism of the Christian right earned the approval of São Paulo’s legislative chamber for a bill (306/2016) declaring December 25 a national day of Christophobia. According to the parliamentarian and pastor, the justification for the bill is to “alert São Paulo society to Christophobia, thus protecting the freedom of belief enshrined in the Constitution. Considering the importance of this event for all churches that profess the Christian faith in a nation with a Christian majority”.<sup>46</sup>

Undoubtedly, religious conservative groups have made some gains by invoking the loss of religious freedom due to the closure of temples during the pandemic. The first was to test the effectiveness of their discursive alignment with the neoliberal premises in the economic orientation of the Bolsonaro government, because they had the support of the top echelon of the government to pressure the judiciary to allow religious activities in temples. The second advantage was to insist on the rhetoric of defending religious freedom as the precious asset of Christianity and the country’s Constitution, which, even in a Christian nation like Brazil, is always under threat. The third advantage was to consolidate the reactive activism of religious activists in the judicial sphere. Despite the pandemic, they did not miss an opportunity to push back against the anti-sexual and identity rights agenda and establish Pro-Life and Pro-Family demands, as we shall see.

#### 4. The Christian Family and Reactive Activism: Gender Ideology

At the official opening of the 75th UN General Assembly in 2020, then-President Bolsonaro declared, “I appeal to the entire international community for religious freedom and the fight against Christophobia”. He concluded his speech by stating, “Brazil is a Christian and conservative country, and the family is its foundation.<sup>47</sup>” Proclaiming Christianity as a national identity and endorsing the traditional family model and conservatism as political options for Brazilians is, to say the least, controversial. As indicated at the beginning of the text, according to census data, Christians are the demographic majority in Brazil, but not even the demographic criterion can be assumed as the identity of the Brazilian Christian people in order to direct public policies on reproductive health.



The Bolsonaro government has highlighted the importance of the family by creating its own Ministry, incorporating the then-Women's Secretariat and the Ministry of Human Rights. This Ministry of the Family, led by evangelical pastor Damares Alves, reflects her significant experience in the National Congress for more than a decade, providing legal advice to evangelical and Catholic parliamentarians. More importantly, she has been active in civil society and religious organizations, as evidenced by the manifesto delivered to newly elected President Bolsonaro in 2018. The minister's name was proposed by 118 pro-life and pro-family organizations, as well as NGOs and Catholic associations, and pastoralists, parliamentarians, and religious doctors. The social activism in favor of issues dear to the Christian right was highlighted, but above all, because Damares Alves represents "an important moment in the field of the defense of the dignity of the human person, the reconstruction of human rights, the fight against barbarism and the banality of evil, the restoration of hope."<sup>48</sup> It is worth noting that two more names were attached to Alves' administration: Michelle Bolsonaro (first lady), also an evangelical, and the Catholic Angela Gandra (who took on the role of national family secretary). This triad was an illustration of the alliances negotiated between conservative evangelicals and Catholics and a sample of the social organization of the Christian right, which was strengthened under Bolsonaro.

On the international stage, the Christian right has had a devoted advocate in the Minister. At the 2019 Demographic Summit in Hungary, she stated that her government defends the right to life from the moment of conception and condemns the practice of abortion as a method of contraception or birth control. "We seek to promote a policy of strengthening maternity and encouraging adoption", she said. "I would like to take this opportunity to invite all the states represented here to join us in forming a group of family-friendly countries, so that, within the framework of the United Nations, they can defend and rescue the values that some sectors often tend to ignore. We also hope that the public policies you have implemented in recent years will be as successful as the Hungarian population expects"<sup>49</sup>.

Months after this pronouncement, the Ministry proposed, in 2020, a controversial National Campaign for Sexual Abstinence and Against Early Pregnancy among Adolescents, in partnership with the Ministry of Health. Among the Campaign's assumptions was the belief that "the onset of sexual activity leads to antisocial or delinquent behavior, resulting in estrangement from parents, school, and faith". The minister also launched the National Plan for the Prevention of Early Sexual Risk, defending the postponement of sexual activity as the best form of contraception. She asked, "What harm can come from telling a child to wait a little longer?" At the time, the Ministry made it clear that information on contraceptives and sex education in schools would continue to be a concern.<sup>50</sup>

Despite this, government representatives have lobbied international organizations (UN and WHO) to remove any reference and/or mention of sex education, health, and reproductive rights from the documents, on the grounds that "they could pave the way for the promotion of abortion". These arguments are echoed by ultraconservative governments that promote pro-family policies, such as Hungary, which has started giving incentives to ensure the birth of more children in order to promote national cohesion in the face of immigration<sup>51</sup>, and Poland, which has tightened its anti-abortion laws.<sup>52</sup>

In times of pandemic, the Ministry of the Family also played an active role in the creation of the Parliamentary Front for Human Rights (2020), with 206 deputies and senators as signatories. This Front proposed an "agenda for life" that defends the rights of the unborn from conception, the protection of the family, considered only as a union between a man and a woman, and the promotion of the Statute for Pregnant Women.<sup>53</sup> The same ideas are present in the Family Statute, which was approved by a special committee in the Chamber of Deputies in 2015, but has not been put into effect and has been shelved in the National Congress to this day, due to its definition of the family as a heteronormative nucleus, which clashes with other legal provisions that recognize same-sex unions (da Silva 2020).

This Statute will therefore be the subject of dispute in Parliament. And it condenses the long road taken by religious parliamentarians to formulate numerous Bills and Draft Amendments to the Constitution, reacting to initiatives from social, feminist, and LGBTQIA+ activism. Some projects: Revision of Punitive Legislation on Abortion (2005), Brazil Without Homophobia Program (2004), 1st National LGBT Conference (2008), III National Human Rights Program—PHDH3 (2009), as a whole, paved the way for the deconstruction of heteronormativity and facilitated other demands that include the sexual diversity of the population. At the same time, confrontation strategies were launched in the media, in the churches, and on the streets, with social sectors that defended an ethical pluralism, establishing a tension between the right to gender equality and the right to religious freedom, considered to be disrespected by these projects.

The activism of the Christian right had little effect on the legal process, in terms of the total or partial approval of bills, and thus showed less political strength in the dispute with progressive parliamentary forces. With hindsight, however, it is possible to say that this journey produced considerable political events. In other words, events with repercussions in various state institutions, in public opinion, in the religious media, and in the National Congress itself led to a sharpening of positions among parliamentarians (Carranza and Da Cunha 2018)<sup>54</sup>. In this dispute, a certain conception of sexuality, the affirmation of sexual roles, and the defense of a patriarchal system were part of parliamentary doctrine and would direct the strategies for formulating guidelines and public policies.

The other component of political activism will be the judicialization of these orientations and will target the attack on “gender ideology” which, even in times of pandemic, has had no respite. According to Biroli (2020, p. 42), we understand reactive judicialization as the use of the law by religious and secular actors to defend moral principles that they consider to be violated by the demands of the feminist and LGBTQI movements, using different arguments and strategies. This is a fundamental mechanism for implementing Bolsonaro’s orientation, which he announced when he took office in 2019: “We are going to unite the people, value the family, respect religions and our Judeo-Christian tradition, fight gender ideology, preserving our values. Brazil will once again be a country free of ideological ties”.<sup>55</sup>

“Gender ideology” has become a topic on the government agenda after three terms of liberal governance, raising questions that sometimes perplex academic circles. For those who have long observed the internal dynamics of evangelicals and Catholics, this development in Brazil was predictable, as noted by Biroli (2020), Machado (2020), Corrêa (2016), and others.

While the extensive and rich literature on gender ideology does not permit a deep exploration in this text, it is important to clarify its meaning. The term, which originated within the Catholic Church in the United States during the 1990s, has gained popularity across various groups and in the media as a pejorative label. This label discredits and demonizes the complex analytical processes in academic gender studies that elucidate gender asymmetries and inequalities. The term’s internationalization has politically empowered it, becoming a nexus for alliances between conservative sectors (both religious and secular) that initiate anti-gender campaigns, ensuring the preservation of social and interpersonal models founded on patriarchy and machismo (Rosado-Nunes and Carranza 2019, p. 939).

Furthermore, as a narrative construct, gender ideology exerts a dual socio-religious influence: conservative groups, on one hand, oppose any public discussion of it, triggering legislative actions that obstruct the enactment of public policies on reproductive and sexual rights across various Latin American countries.

Over a decade ago in Brazil, conservative Catholics and Evangelicals forged an alliance that enabled them to robustly contest the issue of sexual orientation and to defend the family and children against gender ideology (Souza 2014). Active in Parliament, civil society, and both traditional and social media, these religious actors have sought to legitimize and collaboratively enact legislation prohibiting abortion and the inclusion of gender perspectives in education. Machado (2018) highlights numerous activities (seminars, marches, lectures, parliamentary protests, courses) orchestrated by priests, bishops, lay Catholics,

and evangelical media and pastoral leaders, along with a vast array of produced materials (booklets, tracts, articles, news clippings, videos, books, podcasts, websites, hashtags, etc.). According to the author, this widespread engagement in both civil and religious arenas has popularized the discourse of gender ideology and “legitimized the theses upheld therein, which have been reflected in the legislative proposals put forward by religious parliamentarians” (Machado 2018).

In this context, what we observe is a process of reactive politicization, which, according to Vaggione (2020), encompasses the organizational forms of civil society, scientific discourse, and legal articulation. This reactive politicization unites Catholics and evangelicals in a form of reactionary political ecumenism, which Pérez-Guadalupe (2020) identifies as a common feature in the rise of evangelicals in Latin American politics. Additionally, this concept allows for a unique political creativity that mobilizes civil society around the ideals of defending public morality and the traditional family.

Thus, “gender ideology” has emerged as a term that encapsulates criticism of a specific type of morality—Christian morality. It has become the central focus of reactive politicization within Christian political ecumenism, influencing both religious and parliamentary spheres. So pervasive is this issue that the battle against “gender ideology” was a key theme of President-elect Bolsonaro’s electoral campaign, becoming a priority for his government and a significant part of the state agenda.

A notable legal conflict arose during the pandemic when ANAJURE recommended a letter of commitment to the Bolsonaro government, urging that the State, through the Public Prosecutor’s Office, adopt an institutional stance on “religious freedom, sexuality, abortion, gender, the concept of family, and confessional education”. In line with this, Bolsonaro, who describes “gender ideology” as “the devil’s thing<sup>56</sup>”, tasked the Minister of Education, a Presbyterian pastor, with creating a policy to eliminate “ideology in schools”. This proposal sparked numerous lawsuits filed by the Public Prosecutor’s Office, prompted by social movements and defenders of minority rights.

It is important to note that the judicialization of gender ideology is a strategic focus of evangelical activism, influencing legislation, executive actions, and judicial decisions, aiming to dismantle the legal frameworks established during the Workers’ Party (PT) governance from 2002 to 2016. Under the PT administration, gender was a central theme in the development and execution of public policies, used as a tool for the social and political empowerment of various groups, notably LGBTQI+ communities and women (Machado 2020). In contrast, the evangelical agenda seeks to “deconstruct” these policies, promoting the family unit as the core of social structure, typically within stable heterosexual marriages. This agenda aligns with an international conservative movement, such as the Demographic Summit, which focuses on anti-gender and pro-life issues.

This shift has transformed the policy dynamic from state-driven to government-driven, leading to several legislative stalemates in Brazil and the subsequent politicization of the judiciary. Judges, prosecutors, and lawyers often uphold conservative and traditional values. Moreover, this transition shifts the responsibility for addressing complex societal issues from the state to individual families. Recognizing this conservative view on sexuality and family is crucial, as it affects various other societal sectors.

However, the moderate success of this endeavor by the Christian right can largely be attributed to the vast ecclesial network that permeates pastoral activities across the country, and the determination of these religious groups to embed their values as the cornerstone of public morality in what they regard as a Christian nation.

## 5. Closing Remarks

In his inauguration speech on 1 January 2019, then President-elect Jair Bolsonaro pledged to “re-establish moral and ethical values, the right to self-defense, free the people from socialism, and from the inversion of values of political correctness”. With this commitment to end political correctness, Bolsonaro has emboldened a right-wing faction that was previously marginalized, often compelled to reject proposals aimed at criminal-

izing prejudice and discrimination such as racism, homophobia, and sexism. During this period, being right-wing transitioned from a merely descriptive term to one that positively identifies a distinct position on both the political and religious spectrums.

Throughout Bolsonaro's term, explicitly identifying as right-wing and Christian has become a stance from which parliamentarians, media, and pastoral leaders assert their views. This has led to the increased prominence of conservative and ultraconservative Evangelicals and Catholics within the Executive (three Evangelical ministers) and Judiciary (one Evangelical and one Catholic). Organized social bases, including the entities that nominated the pastor to head the Ministry of Family and Human Rights, have also played a significant role in governance. Concurrently, a Christian anti-feminist movement has surged, championed by evangelical and Catholic parliamentarians who proudly proclaim their right-wing allegiance. Despite some dissent among evangelicals and opposition from the Catholic Church's hierarchy, the demands of representatives from the Christian right have gained considerable strength and legitimacy. This prevalence of reactive activism is amplified by religious media, influencers, and social networks, which enhance the visibility of this Christian faction and normalize their discourse and actions.

The pandemic has undeniably served as a political tool, utilized by the government to enforce a chaotic management style, and by the Christian right to support the government's neoliberal agenda, contributing religious, symbolic, and discursive elements that fuel disinformation, anti-intellectualism, and denialism. The government's approach and its affirmation of certain exclusive values have drawn conservative groups of the Christian right closer to Bolsonaro's moral communities. Both groups share a perception of threat from democratic advances in sexual, reproductive, racial, and identity rights, viewing these as destructive to the sacred cosmos that underpins their worldview, which is rooted in heteronormative, essentialist, and binary views of family and sexuality. They publicly express aversion to differences, framing divergence as a threat that must be opposed and, in extreme cases, eradicated. This approach manifests discursively and performatively, predominantly through media and social networks driven by conservative, religious, and secular activism.

What unites Catholic and Evangelical alliances under a common banner is their joint opposition to gender ideology, despite existing internal tensions within these groups. Historically, the Catholic Church focused on defending life, but with gender issues challenging traditional social power structures, it has turned its attention to combating gender ideology. Nevertheless, it is the Pentecostal politicians who prioritize legislative actions and lead judicial activism to curb the expansion of sexual and reproductive rights. During the Bolsonaro era, Catholic and evangelical pro-life and pro-family groups have transcended religious boundaries, enhancing their social influence to rally secular conservative sectors against the gender agenda.

Updated rhetoric on religious freedom, another critical issue during the pandemic, is strategically employed by the Christian right. While the discourse of religious and spiritual service has been crucial in keeping temples open, it is the conservatives' narrative of endangered religious freedom that has prevailed, claiming that legal mandates unjustly targeted church closures. This situation has spotlighted the influential Christian right within key government positions—ministers, lawyers, and prosecutors—and underscored the effectiveness of Pentecostal leaders' judicial activism in stalling the pro-rights agenda for sexual minorities and feminist movements.

However, the advocated religious freedom is narrowly defined within Christian contexts, often excluding potential dialogues with minority faiths, such as African religions. It is a version of religious freedom confined to a nationalist perspective, which, relying on the support of a demographic majority, enables Catholic and Evangelical adherents to advocate for Brazil as a Christian nation, predominantly led by Evangelical figures.

This scenario suggests a shifting balance in the power dynamics within Brazilian Christianity, where the traditional hegemonic influence of the Catholic hierarchy in setting public morality standards is being overtaken by conservative evangelical leaders. This

shift is clearly part of a broader political–religious project, where the narrative of Brazil as a Christian nation is redefining what was once Latin America’s most populous Catholic country. This raises critical questions: To what extent have the alliances of Catholic conservatives, committed to reactive activism against perceived threats to sexual and family morality, contributed to this reversal? Within the church, how is this transition towards a Christian right dominated by evangelicals being interpreted? Additionally, how do conservative Catholics view their integration into the militant Christian right and their role within it?

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## Notes

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- 2 See <https://religioepoder.org.br/artigo/a-influencia-das-religoes-no-brasil/> (accessed on 12 October 2023).
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