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“GOD’S PEOPLE”: OTHERNESS AND DIGITAL MEDIATION IN BRAZILIAN EVANGELICAL NARRATIVE OF THE ISRAEL–HAMAS–PALESTINE WAR

Аннотация. В данной статье анализируется медиапродукция религиозных профилей в цифровых социальных сетях с применением метода картографического дискурс-анализа. Картографический дискурс-анализ используется для картирования психосоциальных ландшафтов, привязанностей, векторов сил, которые постоянно находятся в движении и не имеют иерархической структуры, — например, корней ризоматических растений, послуживших метафорическим источником вдохновения для Делёза и Гваттари. Цель исследования — выявить, как евангелические религиозные фундаменталистские группы, связанные с так называемыми новыми бразильскими правыми, стратегически используют цифровые медиа для конструирования, распространения и переосмысления политических дискурсов. Авторы выявляют взаимосвязи между дискурсивными практиками, для чего проводится исследование того, как эти группы освещали и комментировали конфликт между Израилем, ХАМАС и Палестиной — событие, происходящее в геополитическом, культурном и религиозном контексте, отличном от бразильского, — превращая его в упрощенный моральный нарратив, основанный на дихотомии добра и зла и политической сакрализации Государства Израиль. Будучи встроенными в динамику цифровых медиа, эти группы мобилизуют эссенциалистские, бинарные и редукционистские дискурсы для распространения своих истин, влияния на общественное мнение и привлечения поддержки для со-

циально-политических интервенций. Отмечено усиление языка вражды, направленного против социальных меньшинств, а также легитимация политических лидеров, разделяющих консервативные христианские ценности. Авторы приходят к выводу, что понимание этих дискурсивных практик имеет основополагающее значение для рассмотрения альтернативных форм политического вмешательства, способствующих уважению к разнообразию, равенству и укреплению демократической культуры.

Ключевые слова: церкви неопятидесятников, язык вражды, картографический анализ дискурса, религиозный фундаментализм, социальные сети, инаковость, новые бразильские правые, конфликт между Израилем, ХАМАС и Палестиной

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"GOD'S PEOPLE": OTHERNESS AND DIGITAL MEDIATION IN BRAZILIAN EVANGELICAL NARRATIVE OF THE ISRAEL–HAMAS–PALESTINE WAR

Abstract. This article analyzes media productions of religious profiles on digital social networks, based on Cartographic Discourse Analysis (used in the sense of mapping psychosocial landscapes,



affections, vectors of forces that are always in motion and not hierarchical, such as the roots of rhizomatic plants that served as metaphorical inspiration for Deleuze and Guattari), to understand how evangelical religious fundamentalist groups, associated with the so-called *new Brazilian right*, strategically use digital media to construct, disseminate, and resignify political discourses. We then seek the interconnections between discursive practices. To this end, we investigate how these groups reported and commented on the Israel– Hamas–Palestine conflict – an event situated in a geopolitical, cultural, and religious context distinct from that of Brazil – transforming it into a simplified moral narrative based on the dichotomy between good and evil and the political sacralization of the State of Israel. We argue that, embedded in the dynamics of digital media, these groups mobilize essentialist, binary, and reductionist discourses to disseminate their *single truths*, influence public opinion, and garner support for socio-political interventions. As a result, we observe the strengthening of hate speech directed at social minorities, as well as the legitimization of political leaders aligned with conservative Christian values. We conclude that understanding these discursive practices is fundamental to considering alternative forms of political intervention that promote respect for diversity, equity and the strengthening of democratic culture.

Keywords: Neo-Pentecostal churches, hate speeches, Cartographic Discourse Analysis, religious fundamentalism, social media, otherness, New Brazilian right, Israel– Hamas–Palestine conflict.

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Introduction

Even though humanity has advanced a lot since modern times — heading in a direction without many certainties and with many flexibilities — we live in a world marked by political polarization, in which conceptions that advocate a single and universal truth still prevail. Online social networks are a very fertile field for the growth of political polarization, since they divide Internet users into groups with very different positions. This would not be a problem in itself. However, this virtual environment, where you don’t know, don’t see, or have a relationship with the *Other* is very fruitful for disrespectful discussions, making polarization a real dispute between groups. Furthermore, a supposed anonymity allows anything to be said without the author suffering consequences “in the real world”. More recently, in different Brazilian media — especially digital, — different groups reported and commented on the events of the war between Israel, Hamas and Palestine, giving it a specific interpretation, bound to

our own political disputes, transforming a complex conflict, which has lasted for more than 70 years, into a “war of good against evil”.

Those groups and their productions are situated in a discursive debate centered on the aforementioned conflict. Although composed of different perspectives that are organized in a dispersed manner, approaching and distancing themselves at certain moments, these discourses are generally separated into two major political positions: the pro-Israel groups — whose most prominent profiles are generally aligned with the right-wing spectrum and with Christian religious leaders — and the pro-Palestine groups (generally identified by left-wing profiles). It is worth noting that this division is reinforced by these same groups, normally erasing or silencing the existence of less polarized perspectives.

The central debate is about the legitimacy of territorial control over disputed areas. Pro-Palestine groups argue that these are Palestinian territories, since they have lived there for centuries, therefore the Israeli occupation is illegal, full of violence and human rights violations, motivated by an ethnic dispute and a Zionist state project, which aims to exterminate the Palestinian population [Morais 2023]. As a result, some groups¹ go so far as to identify Hamas as a terrorist organization, yet still distinguish it from the Palestinian population, not representing its entirety, although the fighting has affected the majority of the population [Amnesty International 2024]. There are also understandings that relativize Hamas’ terrorist actions as a response to the colonial project perpetrated by the Israeli military forces [Morais 2023].

On the other side, pro-Israel groups claim that these territories are Israeli, based on biblical texts that describe Israel as a “holy land”. As such, they have a legitimate right to attack the Palestinian population, under the justification of fighting the terrorist group Hamas, and to take control and “pacify” these areas. This interpretation, based on biblical readings, often leads to the understanding that any opponent of the State of Israel is attacking the God of Christianity Himself, and must therefore be eliminated [Rosa 2010].

Based on these brief ideas, in this article, we aim to discuss the way in which this polarization has been emerging in Brazilian society, based on the amplification of the voices of religious leaders who entered legitimately, that is, through voting, into various institutions of a State that calls itself secular. Therefore, our debate and analyses are focused on a specific segment, the pro-Israel one, and specifically on the discursive productions of groups aligned with the right-wing fundamentalist Christian religious spectrum.

The discourses of certain evangelical² groups have been taking over the Brazilian reality, escaping the religious field and taking over political, social and cultur-

¹ As discussed earlier, this division and explanation of pro-Palestine and pro-Israel groups, with condensed and consistent arguments and perspectives, is an essentialization of much more complex points of views, situations, social and political groups. In reality, the discourses contain contradictions, temporary alignments and negotiations that, sometimes, are strategically silenced. Therefore, we initially discuss only the main distinctions between these groups, generally produced by themselves.

² Although the scope of this article is not to discuss the formation of evangelical groups in Brazil, it is essential to escape the trap of essentialism by those who understand them as a

al fields, in the most diverse debates and in the most diverse media. When addressing the emergence of evangelicals in the Brazilian political scene, Cunha [2019a] points out how transformations in gospel culture, in the transition from the 20th to the 21st century, provoked a process of publicization and politicization of these religious groups. Especially with the formation of the first evangelical bloc, in the Constituent Congress of 1986, this segment abandoned the posture of isolation in relation to political participation, beginning to live with ideals related to visibility in public life [Ibid.]. This process intensified in the early 2000s, through its rapprochement with the media, with greater institutionalized political participation, with the implementation of social projects in partnership with the public authorities, as well as with the establishment of other strategies.

In this sense, the different evangelical groups began to play an increasingly relevant role in the institutionalized political scenario, following common agendas and projects. Regardless of the peculiarities of the different groups that comprise the Brazilian evangelical segment, their main characteristics classically identified by the field of religious studies are, according to Cunha [2007]: 1) a predominant fundamentalist (literalist) reading of the Bible; 2) an emphasis on personal piety in the search for salvation of the soul; 3) frequent stances of rejection of non-Christian cultural manifestations in the country; 4) isolation from social demands (resulting from the spiritualization of issues of individual and social existence). In this work, they may be referred to as *neo-Pentecostal evangelicals* or *fundamentalist evangelicals*, since we understand that, in the Brazilian context, the term evangelicals designates a broader and more heterogeneous group, but the group that interests us is mostly composed of those who are part of neo-Pentecostal denominations and follow fundamentalist precepts.

One of the biggest strategies of these groups has been to take advantage of the great reach of online social networks, as a manner to propagate hateful ideas against everything and everyone that does not fit into what they have established as “God’s truth” [Dreher 2006]. To achieve this goal, they very often detach themselves from the so-called “real world” to attack those who simply do not share their ideas. It is clear to us that issues of gender, religion, culture and politics are the best targets for affecting minorities and, simultaneously, attracting masses of believers, invariably for electoral reasons [Biroli et al. 2020].

To enter the discussion, it is necessary to reflect on otherness and difference, given the plurality of understandings about both. The notion of otherness

homogeneous conservative bloc and not as a plural religious segment. This reduced vision, according to Cunha [2019b], is only of interest to those who want to instrumentalize religion, in the name of power projects. On the contrary, in the author’s understanding, “...exercising faith in politics requires fidelity to the principles of the Gospel of love, peace with justice, mercy, detachment and tolerance in the midst of differences” [Cunha 2019b], translated by the authors. Therefore, in this text, when we refer to an evangelical group or evangelical groups, we are referring to a set of segments that declare themselves evangelical, and that are not only right-wing, but that defend anti-democratic practices through feelings of threat, fear and distrust built as a basis for the “good we” versus the “evil other”.

is articulated with difference [Maluf 2010], as it was constituted based on “the great divider”: “Ourself” and the “Other”. For a long time, this separation was maintained in defense of scientific rigor. This is also a power relationship in which, in this separation, it is the “Ourself” that defines what “Others” are like. It is from this great division that the world is defined in oppositions between primitive and civilized; archaic and modern; nature and culture.

This logic can be found in several evangelical groups, because they — generally composed of white, straight men who defend the patriarchy — are the ones who define who others are, and also because of the need to separate the world into two, in the name of a single truth and path that have already been previously defined [Cunha 2007; 2009a]. Following this division, the scission is no longer between primitive and civilized, and becomes based on the opposition between good and evil, in which “Others” are hierarchized as beings without light and inferior, and “Ourself” as the materialization of enlightenment and of superiority. Obviously, in this perspective, the evangelical group has the superior place and the “Others” the inferior, referring to an evolutionary perspective in which it is possible to leave the “condition of evil” and be saved by “good” [Maluf 2010].

Even in the face of the displacement of this notion of otherness towards experience, considering the encounters between cultures and their interpretation, here we use the notion of otherness based on the great division, as it is from this way of thinking that debates and relations of power defended by evangelical groups, concerning diversity, are built. Here, the notion of otherness will defend not only the separation between “Ourself” and “Others”, but also a regime of truth imposed on different cultures.

In this article, therefore, we propose a discussion about the way in which the Israel–Hamas–Palestine conflict is publicized on Brazilian online social networks and how it intervenes in local relations of otherness, seeking to understand how the dissemination of hate speech on social media contributes to the relegation of the image of the “Other” to almost sub-human categories. We are also interested in understanding which resources and rhetorics are mobilized for the representation /intervention of/in otherness.

To this end, we resorted to the theoretical-methodological framework of Cartographic Discourse Analysis [Deusdará, Rocha 2021] to analyze media productions branched into religious profiles from different online social networks. Comprehending that essentializing the real is a way of denying experience and immobilizing the world, cartography, on the contrary, aims to dismantle constituted forms and denaturalize stereotypes, as it “also implies an ethical-political commitment to a way of saying that expresses processes of change in oneself and in the world”³ [Passos, Benevides 2015: 170]. Therefore, cartography values the plane of experience and is not done in a prescriptive way nor does it establish predetermined objectives; it is constructed through clues that guide the researcher’s path. Unlike modern science, which isolates the

³ Here and further in the text, in all passages originally in Portuguese, the translation is by the authors.

object, cartography seeks to investigate its historical articulations and its connections with the world so that it can disarticulate the lines of devices.

This article is divided into four parts. The first proposes a debate on issues related to discourse studies, in its interface with the development of online digital media and its mobilization for political activism. Next, we present the process of rise of the extreme right-wing in Brazil, which had a privileged locus in digital media. In the third part, we highlight the points of emergence of religious fundamentalism in Brazil and its action in the institutionalized political field. Finally, we carried out a discursive analysis of productions by these fundamentalist evangelical groups, with the theme of the Israel– Hamas– Palestine conflict, in online digital media, seeking to highlight local (re)constructions of otherness in light of this conflict in the Middle East.

Discursive practices, digital media and political activism

When talking about discourse, we refer to its understanding based on the conception of discursive practice, proposed by Foucault [2012] as the set of historically constructed rules that define, in a determined space and time, the conditions for exercising enunciation for a certain social, economic, geographic or even linguistic area. Appropriating this concept, Maingueneau [1989] starts to define discursive practices as the simultaneous production of texts and communities, in a reciprocal process, in which a given community produces texts which give visibility to that same community. Therefore, Maingueneau [1989: 56] moves away from conceptions that reduce discursive practice to a mere sequence of words, highlighting the “essential reversibility between the two faces, social and textual, of discourse”.

Since discourse — or discursive practice — is the articulation between text and community, whose production is regulated by socio-historically defined rules, we cannot agree with the existence of neutral enunciations, since to enunciate, that is, produce texts, is to situate oneself in the social field, to produce communities. In line with this understanding of discursive practice and enunciation, we highlight the conception of “language-intervention” systematized by Décio Rocha [2006; 2014], for whom more than the mere ability to represent the reality around it — as if language and reality were separated, — language participates in reality, intervenes in it, constructs it. So:

It would, perhaps, be preferable to assume that language does have some power of representation, but the world would no longer coincide exactly with the representation of that world through language, since, by making reference to that world, language freezes the time, alters distances, offering us a portrait — always partial — of a given moment, the portrait of a past reality and /or a new landscape that does not coincide with the geographic coordinates of everything that can be verified in the “live world” [Rocha 2014: 624].

Therefore, language acts to (re)construct worlds, intervening socially, culturally and politically on subjects and on their subjectivities, in all fields of social

life, always permeated by different languages. Among them, we highlight online digital media, which have assumed an increasingly greater role in recent years, considering that, since the formation of the so-called Web 2.0, technological-informational advances have progressively articulated human and non-human practices and displaced the classic unidirectionality of informational production and consumption. More than publishing pages with static information, Web 2.0 started to enable interactions in publications and produce greater forms of virtual action. Online social networks, in rapid progress since the last decade, are digital environments generated by platforms that bring together different users with a view to establishing contacts with other people, so that, at least supposedly, any online user can share their publications with thousands of people all over the world⁴ [Padilha, Facioli 2018].

Interactions between subjects can take place in different ways, such as messages, posts — longer or shorter, — photos, videos, etc., depending on the chosen social network and the resources they make available and require to operate, specializing them. As an effect, it produces what Jenkins [2006] calls “convergence culture”. Highlighting its participatory and collective bias, the author points out that:

By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes depending on who’s speaking and what they think they are talking about [Jenkins 2006: 2–3].

Online social networks, inserted in a context of convergence of platforms, industries and subjects, therefore become places of differentiated discursive productions, whose characteristics and rules dialogue with these specific flows and cooperation, and which have their reach enhanced through the World Wide Web. In this context, different perspectives on the role of social media in social and political discussions emerge, sometimes proclaiming its centrality, sometimes denying it. However, we understand that, although social media can be defined as external to institutionalized political systems, its multifaceted influence is progressively entering the spaces of state decisions and permeating their subjects [Mendonça et al. 2016; Lakkysetty et al. 2018]. We can add that, even outside institutionalized political spaces, social media is also impacting the political systems through social movements, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other actors that constantly interact with it as civil society.

⁴ It is important to remember that, contrary to what is often said, the Internet and social networks are not democratic. Even though there are advances — in 2020, Brazil had 152 million Internet users and 83% of homes connected, — the vast majority of users of the less favored classes access the Internet only via cellphone; having, consequently, less utilization of online opportunities, such as cultural activities, school research, distance learning courses, remote work and the use of government tools.

Thus, considering the various interactions that routinely take place on these platforms, we highlight their mobilization for the development of practices that we call “political-activists” [Villela et al. 2022], understanding that, in addition to the inherent political character of discursive practices, those practices seek to reaffirm a defined political project, with guidelines and a given societal reference. Online social networks have assumed a central role in the analysis of the contemporary socio-political field, as they enable social debates, production and dissemination of statements by institutionalized political figures, and even function as tools for data control and for the dissemination of fake news.

The way information and debates circulate in these networks has specificities that affect their distribution, depending, to a considerable extent, on the interaction and engagement of the subjects. Recuero, Soares and Zago [2021: 4] state that “...the circulation of information on social media depends on the action of users <...>, who use the resources provided by the digital media platforms (such as retweet and share buttons) to increase the visibility of certain content”.

Based on these information dissemination actions, online social networks begin to recirculate certain content and, therefore, enhance the spread of information through different groups. As a result, these users have access to heterogeneous content, even if its diversity occurs to a greater or lesser extent. However, even in the midst of heterogeneity, we also see the emergence of so-called “echo chambers”, that is, “...groups that filter the content they share, giving preference to information that reinforces a particular political narrative” [Recuero et al. 2021: 4]. These chambers are often the result of the functioning of specific algorithms of the very online social networks [Soares et al. 2018], which tend to create so-called clusters.

Once access to heterogeneous — and even antagonistic — content is added to filters that reinforce certain political narratives, online social networks become able to generate *feedback loop advertisements* [Benkler et al. 2018; Recuero et al. 2021], which are understood as an information ecosystem made up of different users who employ strategies to reinforce certain political narratives and which, in many cases, culminate in a greater radicalization of subjects and an increase in the circulation of disinformation among them. By strengthening this loop, it is precisely these more politically radicalized subjects who tend to further reinforce single narratives through sharing biased information [Soares et al. 2018].

Digital media and the rise of the online fundamentalist extremist right-wing movement

With the expansion of political-activist use of online social networks, different groups have achieved great visibility through the mobilization of new digital-organizational structures of the Internet to spread their political perceptions and gain popular support. This is especially the case with those linked to the extreme right of the political spectrum, which mobilize elements of these networks to dis-

seminate, as commented before, discourses that attack the rights of representative minorities [Villela et al. 2022].

The rise of these groups, popularly called “new rights” (“*novas direitas*”, in Portuguese), can be widely seen in Brazil from June 2013 onwards, when several popular manifestations took place across the country, initially in opposition to the increase in the price of public transport tickets, but, over time, their agendas were modified, assuming a supposed “anti-corruption” character. These manifestations became a movement of attack and destabilization of the government of then president Dilma Rousseff (from the Workers’ Party — PT, “*Partido dos Trabalhadores*”, in Portuguese) and progressively taking on the agenda of the Brazilian extreme right.

Telles states that there is evidence that:

...right-wing thinking, anti-PTism and ambiguity regarding support for democracy are widespread among protesters against the Dilma Rousseff government, and that portions of the middle classes are attentive and sensitive to right-wing ideological proposals. The position on the right is expressed in a position contrary to public social inclusion policies promoted by those governments [Telles 2016: 99].

The rise of new right-wing groups and their manifestations emerge as a response, in Brazil, to the effects of the global economic crisis — which began in 2008, — but it was constructed as a solution to a supposed moral crisis, whose origin would only be corruption, assumed as a problem of PT management and not as a result of the capitalist and oligarchic structures that constitute our country’s political history. As an example of the growth of these groups, we witnessed a change in the balance of left-right support in Brazilian elections over the past decade. The then President Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva (PT) was first elected, in 2002, with 61,27% of the votes against the then candidate José Serra (from the Brazilian Social Democracy Party — PSDB, “*Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira*”, in Portuguese), and was reelected in 2006 with 60,83% against Geraldo Alckmin (also from PSDB at the time) [Ghiraldelli, Rodrigues 2022]. Dilma Rousseff (PT) was elected for the first time as President in 2010 with 56,07% of the votes against José Serra, won her reelection, in 2014, with 51,64% of the votes against Aécio Neves (also from PSDB) [G1 2010; 2014]. It is important to notice that these candidates from PSDB, the biggest right-wing opposition until then, were aligned mainly to a neoliberal economic agenda.

Based on this anti-corruption character and other political narratives, the opposition to Dilma Rousseff’s government managed to initiate impeachment proceedings against the President in 2015 and to have them approved in 2016. This process was — and still is — widely criticized by sectors of the left and by various scholars of democratic relations in Brazil, who call it a *coup*⁵, carried out through lawfare, that is, a *coup d’état* process in which armed force was replaced by a legal

⁵ For a better understanding of the discursive clash between the terms *coup* versus impeachment, see: Jinkings, Doria and Cleto [2016].

war, marked by the presence of legal devices instrumentalized for specific political ends [Bonadiman 2023].

After Dilma Rousseff’s departure, the then vice-president, Michel Temer, assumed the presidency, implementing a series of neoliberal and repressive measures. In the midst of this process, these groups that compose the “new right” began to occupy various positions in both the legislative and executive branches. In this sense, we highlight the 2018 elections, which — having been marked by several cases of political violence, especially against social minorities [Costa et al. 2018; Gregorio 2018] — elected Jair Bolsonaro (from Social Liberal Party — PSL⁶, at the time) as President of the Republic, with 55,13% of the votes against Fernando Haddad (PT) [G1 2018].

This election is symbolic because, despite the common economic agenda with the hitherto majority right-wing groups (such as the PSDB), Bolsonaro represents the rise of the Brazilian extreme-right, marked by its violent attitude towards the democratic system, the social minorities and their political opposition. As described by Goldstein:

Bolsonarism empowers sexists, reinforces hierarchies, denies difference. It is an endorsement of authoritarianism at the macro and micro social level. This has been seen in the second round of the campaign with the attacks suffered by political activists or minorities who do not fit into the authoritarian worldview proposed by Bolsonarists [Goldstein 2019: 225–226].

During the Bolsonaro government, these groups saw their agendas take shape and become effective in public policies, strengthening the logic of *war against enemies* and that *minorities must adapt to the laws of the majority* [Andrade 2022]. It is necessary to highlight that these “new rights” are “the confluence of diverse groups, whose union is above all pragmatic and motivated by the perception of a common enemy” [Miguel 2018: 19], and that they aligned based on three central agendas.

From an economic perspective, they propose minimal state intervention, seeking to encourage State deregulation of economic exchanges and social rights. In their moral bias — especially the fundamentalist neo-Pentecostal evangelicals and conservative Catholics, — they seek a broad “restoration” of fundamentalist Christian religious values, which supposedly have been “attacked” by advances in feminist and other minority groups agendas. Finally, in line with a political-nationalist bias, these groups have been leading the revival, in Brazil, of an exacerbated nationalism, of McCarthyist / anti-communist inspirations — opportunistically used as a synonym for anti-PTism, — opposed to Latin American regional policies, particularly with the Bolivarian and Cuban governments. Even though they encompass different strands, these groups are often associated, merging aspects and producing new hybridisms.

As for the moral agenda, it has especially seen the development of opposition to feminist and other minority groups rights, which are regarded as threats to be

⁶ *Partido Social Liberal*, in Portuguese.

not only fought but exterminated. Under this logic, many fundamentalists who call themselves victims of a supposed “communist dictatorship” use it as a way of opposing themselves to any initiative to reduce gender inequalities and oppression of sexual minorities, mobilizing their online social networks to this end [Miguel 2018; Villela et al. 2022]. On them, mainly Facebook⁷ and Twitter⁸, these conspiracist discourses mobilized, in the last two presidential elections of 2018 and 2022, — and still mobilize — bases of support for groups that range from neoconservatism to fundamentalism. We are interested, especially in this case, in religious fundamentalism and its insertion in the political sphere, which precedes online social networks.

Religious fundamentalism and its political activity in Brazil

Fundamentalism, as a movement, began at the beginning of the 20th century in the form of a response by Protestants in the United States to modernism that had “taken over the Protestant world” [Dreher 2006: 82]. In opposing modern science, the contents of faith and the literal inspirations of the Bible were considered fundamental and untouchable. It is understood, therefore, that, instead of modernizing religion, what is intended is

...the explicit religious foundation of Modernity. This applies to fundamentalism anywhere in the world. What is sought is not, for example, to modernize Islam, but to re-Islamize the Islamic world. What is sought is not a secular conception of the State of Israel, but its theocratic-religious foundation. What is sought is not the secularization of Christianity, but the re-Christianization of the Western world [Dreher 2006: 85].

These fundamentalists understand that, to be perfect, society, in its entirety, must submit “to religious truth”, which is, therefore, essential for political action [Dreher 2006]. Returning to the current situation in Brazil, we believe it is relevant to show, although in general terms, the path of fundamentalist churches’ entry into the National Congress⁹.

From just one representative, elected in 1933 to the Brazilian Federal Legislative Power, these churches came to twelve seats in the Chamber of Deputies in 1982. This number reached thirty-two in 1986, in a composition of thirteen deputies from the Assemblies of God (AD, *Assembleias de Deus*, in Portuguese), two from the Foursquare Gospel Church (*Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular*, in Portuguese) and one from the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD, *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, in Portuguese). It is worth noting that

⁷ Facebook is a product of the Meta company, which is designated an extremist organization in the Russian Federation. — *Editors*.

⁸ Although its name has been changed to X, we chose to keep the old name of the Twitter network throughout the article as it is still the most used name in Brazil.

⁹ In Brazil, the Congress is composed of the Federal Senate (made up of 81 senators, who represent the 27 federative units, that is, the 26 states and the Federal District) and the Chamber of Deputies (made up of 513 federal deputies, who represent the people).

this last election formed the Constituent Congress of redemocratization, and, consequently, culminated in the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988, in force to this day [Lacerda 2022].

This religious presence in the political-state field facilitated Pentecostal insertion in politics at the end of the 1980s; after all, redemocratization and constituent elections fostered the evangelical search for equality with the Catholic Church, whose presence in politics dates back to the colonial period. Since then, there has been a considerable increase in the number of seats occupied by politicians in defense of evangelical agendas in the National Congress: today, there is an Evangelical Parliamentary Front that, according to the website of the Chamber of Deputies (Câmara dos Deputados, 2023), currently has 245 members, 26 senators and 219 deputies. This undertaking is the result of a corporate model of political representation adopted by neo-Pentecostal churches, with candidacies promoted among their faithful¹⁰. In 2018, Bolsonaro was elected by these religious groups and their leaders as the “candidate from the Brazilian family”, while the PT candidate, Fernando Haddad, was considered a threat to this religious conception of family. As a result of this political-religious association, in the second round of the 2018 elections, 70% of evangelical votes went to Bolsonaro, while 26% went to Haddad [Goldstein 2019].

It is evident that the aforementioned “religious truths” defended by these groups — often marked by conspiracist biases — have been aligned with hegemonic political action. It is simple to argue that, more than a fundamentalist bias, these groups have also guided the lives of their followers through discursive strategies that extol meritocracy and competitiveness, based on neoliberal thinking, understood here, in line with Dardot and Laval [2016: 15], as a “set of discourses, practices and devices that determine a new way of governing men according to the universal principle of competition”.

As a result, we witness political action based on discursive clashes that oppose the rights and identities of social minorities for whom, on a daily basis, they express hatred. A classified “Other”, undermined based on criteria such as race, nationality, geographic region, sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity, religion. A dehumanized “Other”, who does not correspond to the white, straight, cisgender, masculine, Christian “Ourselves”. An “Other” that has long ceased to be “different”, to become the “enemy”, which, as discussed by Mbembe [2017], is constituted far from face-to-face conflicts with armies and which is fought by outsourced mercenaries and organizations opposing the management

¹⁰ However, it is necessary to restrict this group of churches, since only a small part of them has the capacity to elect their candidates. Endowed with a centralized structure, the successful churches in this political-state project are the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD) and the Assemblies of God (AD), since, in 2018, around 60% of evangelical candidates came from these religious institutions. In addition, even if unofficially, the IURD has control of a political party, the “Republicans” (*Republicanos*, in Portuguese), which despite being officially secular, has its decision-making bodies dominated by members of that church. In turn, the AD disperses its candidates among different parties whose power is centralized in party leaders and that have few restrictions on candidacies [Lacerda 2022].

of conflicts, by international networks without borders, without territorial logic, uninterested in taking power.

Religious fundamentalism has been inserted not only in the political-institutional field, but in various spheres and social groups. An unusual example is the growth of a criminal group linked to drug trafficking that calls itself “Aaron’s troop” (*Tropa de Arão*, in Portuguese)¹¹. In the north zone of the city of Rio de Janeiro, these drug traffickers already dominate a territory made up of some favelas, called “Israel’s Complex” (*Complexo de Israel*, in Portuguese). They raise the flag of Israel and paint biblical verses and religious symbols, such as the Star of David (fig. 1), in different areas of the territories under their control, in addition to directing various forms of violence against residents who do not follow the precepts of their religion, such as members of religions of Afro-Brazilian origins or other minority groups [Campos et al. 2023; Cunha, 2019b].



Fig. 1. Mural made by drug traffickers in the so-called “Israel’s Complex” [G1 2023]

This phenomenon of assimilation of religious dogmas by traffickers — called by researchers NarcoPentecostalism or Narco Pentecostalism [Alessi 2021] — is not the only example of appropriation of Jewish symbols as a way of reaffirming a Christian fundamentalist belief, even though Judaism is a religion distinct from Protestantism and Catholicism. Many fundamentalist groups resort to a simplistic and detached from reality logic, which is based on biblical texts that describe Israel as a “holy land”, to reaffirm Christian sovereignty and reinforce an image of “defenders of the West”. For this reason, the presence of Israeli flags and symbols such as the “Star of David” at manifestations by these groups is frequent.

With the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas, on October 7, 2023, this rhetoric intensified. Thus, these groups began to report and comment on

¹¹ Biblical character, brother of Moses.

the events of the war between Israel and Palestine¹² — equating the nation with the terrorist group — in different media, especially digital ones, transforming a complex conflict, which has lasted for more than 70 years, in a war of “good against evil”, in a logic in which any of Israel’s opponents is attacking the God of Christianity Himself and must, therefore, be eliminated. They affirm that “we are Christians like Israel”; “We are not terrorists and that is why we are with Israel”¹³.

“Pray for Israel” and go “after them”: Brazilian fundamentalist reconstructions of the Israel–Hamás–Palestine conflict

As mentioned previously, online social networks are marked by the flow of content through various media platforms, and this is no different with the constructions of these religious fundamentalist groups. Such specificity highlights a non-linearity of the discourse, directly impacting research approaches. So, as a way of mapping the discursive production on the Israel–Hamás–Palestine conflict on Brazilian online social networks as well as its impacts in local relations of otherness, we resort to the Cartographic Discourse Analysis (*Análise Cartográfica do Discurso* — AnaCarDis, a Portuguese acronym), a theoretical and methodological framework created by two Brazilian professors at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), Bruno Deusdará and Décio Rocha [Deusdará, Rocha 2021].

Based on the work of French authors, such as Dominique Maingueneau [1989; 2008], Oswald Ducrot [1987] and Jacqueline Authier-Revuz [1998], AnaCarDis incorporates into discursive studies the notion of *cartography*, presented by Deleuze and Guattari in the introduction to the first volume of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [Deleuze, Guattari 2011], as one of the principles of the rhizome, as stated by Deusdará and Rocha:

From *A Thousand Plateaus*, we want to focus here on the lesson left about the rhizome, since cartography — a topic that speaks to us closely — is one of the six principles that characterize it. It is from this principle that we will seek to extract not exactly a working method in DA, but an attitude and a perspective regarding the justification of the procedures adopted [Deusdará, Rocha 2021: 200].

In this movement, concepts such as *cartography* and *rhizome* became central to our research, in the sense of mapping psychosocial landscapes, affections, vectors of forces that are always in motion and not hierarchical, such as the roots of rhizomatic plants that served as metaphorical inspiration for Deleuze and Guattari. We then seek the interconnections between discursive practices.

¹² We authors, when using “war against Palestine”, seek to highlight that, even when named as opposing Hamas, attacks and armed incursions occur in its territory and have killed mostly civilians [Amnesty International 2024].

¹³ Those statements can be found in videos of manifestations by these groups, such as [Uol 2024].

Understanding that there is a diversity of currents of discourse analysis, AnaCarDis was initially based on its French enunciative approach. Over the past decades, it became progressively a collective work, developed by different universities in Brazil¹⁴, especially the UERJ. Our research incorporates other discussions, such as those on the *philosophy of difference* and *Brazilian ethnic-racial studies* as worked out by [Deusdará, Rocha 2021; Alves, Giorgi 2020; Calixto et al. 2021].

When mobilizing AnaCarDis in our research, we aim to discuss the co-construction between texts and communities, not only as a way of understanding the use of certain linguistic marks (such as the use of adjectives and modalization) in a given context, but to analyze which social, political and cultural issues are re-constructed by those texts (through the linguistic marks) and how this acts in power relations and social fields. With the cartographic perspective, we assume an ethical and political attitude towards our academic work, abandoning a so-called neutral posture and understanding and narrating our implications on the research process.

If we try, in a very brief way, to create a possible research itinerary in AnaCarDis, it would be made up of questions such as:

1. What are the implications that, as researchers, we trigger when we produce a research object?
2. In what ways can we denaturalize what, at first glance, seems already established?
3. What are the discourses that support certain communities and practices and are produced by them?
4. What discursive networks can be mapped based on a given social issue?
5. What are the linguistic clues that support the meanings constructed by the researcher?

But this itinerary is not unique, nor is it fixed: the processuality, inherent to cartographic practice, establishes that it will be constructed according to the researcher's progress in developing his own research.

Thus, we move away from a perspective that advocates the collection of a corpus to be analyzed, as if it were previously defined and must be “discovered” by the researcher. On the contrary, we understand that the corpus is actively constructed through the relationships of doing research. Amidst this inherent interference of the researcher in his practice, the cartographic perspective proposes the narrativity of the choice processes and the analysis of its implications. When building our corpus of analysis, we sought to address publications present in different media — Twitter and Instagram¹⁵, — highlighting the mobilization of Jewish symbols, the construction of a mythical Israel and the legitimization of forms of violence against “Others” by Brazilian religious fundamentalist groups. We emphasize that our analyses are not about the conflict that we call

¹⁴ A brief overview of the trajectory of this group was outlined by us in a previous work: [Oliveira et al. 2023].

¹⁵ Instagram is a product of the Meta company, which is designated an extremist organization in the Russian Federation. Henceforth we mark mentions of Instagram with an asterisk. — *Editors*.

Israel—Hamas—Palestine, but rather about how Brazilian fundamentalist religious groups have appropriated the aforementioned war to attract believers — and votes — based on the spread of hate speech and fake news on their social networks.

In this sense, the discursive clashes that populated the Internet after the start of the conflict in the Middle East show us a series of associations between symbols of Judaism and the rhetoric of Brazilian Christian fundamentalism. However, such associations encompass a series of inconsistencies and misinformation, since at the same time as they reinforce the use of Jewish symbols, they indicate that this appropriation is, sometimes, superficial, pointing to a lack of knowledge of the religious foundations of Judaism.



Figs. 2 (left), 3 (right). Screenshots of tweets in left-wing profiles (2024)

Translation of fig. 2: I'm confused now. The Star of David (of Israel) has 6 points. The five-pointed one is the pentagram and is linked to esotericism, magic, occultism, witchcraft, etc. But I always thought you Bolsonaroists were Christians...

Translation of fig. 3: These images symbolize the extreme right's unrealistic and deeply anti-Semitic fetishization of the Jewish people and Israel. Replacing the Star of David with the pentagram is a flawed act that reveals many layers of Bolsonaroism.

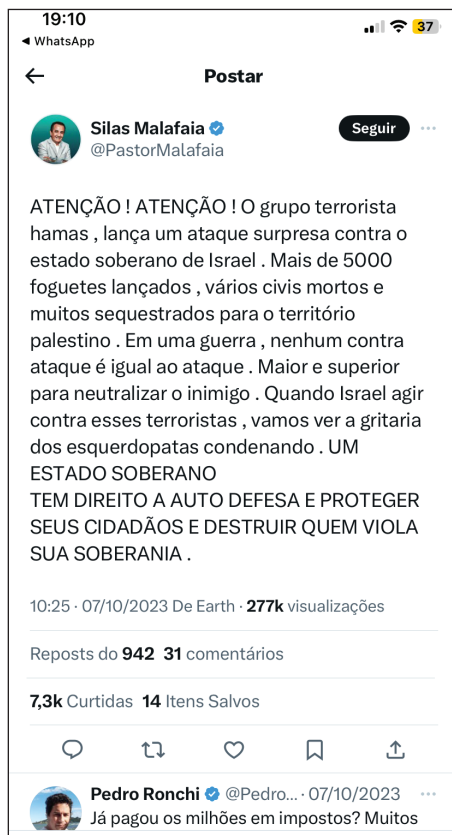


Fig. 4. Screenshot of post by Pastor Silas Malafaia on Twitter (2023)

Translation:

ATTENTION! ATTENTION! The terrorist group Hamas launches a surprise attack against the sovereign state of Israel. More than 5000 rockets launched, several civilians killed and many kidnapped into Palestinian territory. In a war, no counter attack is the same as the attack. Bigger and superior to neutralize the enemy. When Israel acts against these terrorists, we will see the outcry of esquerdopatas¹⁶ condemning them.

A SOVEREIGN STATE HAS THE RIGHT TO SELF-DEFENSE AND TO PROTECT ITS CITIZENS AND DESTROY THOSE WHO VIOLATE ITS SOVEREIGNTY.

These posts (figs. 2 and 3), taken from left-wing profiles on Twitter, exemplify how symbols of Judaism, mobilized in manifestations by religious fundamentalist groups, could be a way of defending the imposition of Christian morality against other political groups, which, in turn, respond to this rhetoric. The highlighted discursive clash, which began with the replacement of the Jewish symbol on the Israeli flag, used to defend a Christian political agenda, shows how religious sym-

¹⁶ The term *esquerdopatas*, in Portuguese, is the combination of the words *esquerda* 'left' and *psicopata* 'psychopath', being a pejorative form that associates the defense of agendas linked to the left of the political spectrum with an obsession, violence and a mental disorder. It is commonly used by extreme-right groups.

bolism is increasingly linked to political discussions, whether in a dogmatic use, as a justification for extreme-right agendas; or in an ironic response, published by left-wing groups to demoralize supporters of Bolsonaroism. Although the five-pointed star is also a Christian symbol, generally identified as the Star of Bethlehem, it could be a symbol of witchcraft or occultism [Deursen 2024]. For this reason, the presence of a pentagram within an Israeli flag became prominent in left-wing groups (as seen previously), becoming a form of criticism directed at this association between different religions aiming at political ends. We, therefore, see a reconstruction of the Israel– Hamas–Palestine conflict in discursive clashes between extreme-right/religious fundamentalist and left-wing groups.

The mobilization of Jewish symbols and the image of Israel as a way of defending Christian morality — and its consequent controversy, — even existing before the intensification of the conflict between Israel, Hamas and Palestine, began to strengthen with these new attacks [Deursen 2024]. Consequently, we also bring a post (fig. 4) on Twitter by Pastor Silas Malafaia, leader of the church “Assembly of God Victory in Christ” (*Assembleia de Deus Vitória em Cristo*, in Portuguese) — which has congregations in three countries and 200,000 members — from October 7th, when the Hamas attack took place in Israel, whose response was a sequence of bombings by the Israeli army in Gaza.

This pastor is known in Brazil for his aggressive speeches against left-wing politicians or any person — or groups of people — who are contrary to his conservative position, based on neo-Pentecostal Christianity. His posts on social networks, whether in videos or written texts, and almost always authoritarian and sensationalist in tone, gain notoriety among his followers as a truth to be followed, and among his opponents, as a controversy to be denied.

The post we highlighted above already anticipates the possibility of a massive attack by Israel on Palestine, justifying it as a way to “neutralize the enemy”. To the “Other”, his opposite, he attributes, in a pejorative way, the adjective *esquerdopatas* (leftist), a term widely used by those who identify with the conservative politics of the extreme right. By stating that they would produce an “outcry condemning” a possible counterattack by Israel, he puts on stage a simulacrum of what would be the binary that constitutes the discursive clash in relation to the war in Palestine: on the one hand, an ultra-conservative right, guided by religious dogmas, which defends the sanctity of the State of Israel based on biblical texts; on the other hand, the left defending Hamas, which attacks Israeli sovereignty. In stating that it is a simulacrum, we are in agreement with Dominique Maingueneau [2008: 100] when he states that “...utterances of the Other are only ‘understood’ within the interpreter’s semantic closure; to constitute and preserve its identity in the discursive space, discourse cannot interact with the Other as such, but only as a simulacrum that builds from it”.

This means that Silas Malafaia marks as the positioning of his “Other” what is, in fact, his understanding of that “Other’s” discourse, based on his own positions and beliefs. In this way, any discourse that distances itself from this “Self” that the pastor performs would be an attack on “the sovereign state of Israel”, which, previously, would have obtained “the right to defend and protect” its citi-

zens, as well as “to destroy” those who try to “violate its sovereignty”. Based on this sacred right of self-defense, since it would be the nation chosen by God, the vision of a large part of evangelical fundamentalists approaches the legitimization of violence in defense of Israel, no matter how bloody are the Israeli attacks on Palestine, regardless of the fact that the vast majority of victims of these attacks are innocent civilians.

This legitimization produces debates and campaigns on social networks, so that, when researching these productions, we come across the hashtag #oreporisrael (#prayforisrael), which, at the same time, is present and brings together countless posts like this on fig. 5.



Fig. 5. Screenshot of a post on Instagram* (2023)

Translation: PRAY FOR ISRAEL

IT IS CERTAIN THAT THE GUARD OF ISRAEL DOES NOT SLEEP

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: ‘May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels’. For the sake of my family and friends, I will say, ‘Peace be within you’. For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your prosperity.

Fig. 5 was posted on the Instagram* page of Pastor André Valadão, who, like Malafaia, leads a church whose numbers reach large proportions, the Igreja Batista da Lagoinha, which today has around 700 temples spread across Brazil and the world [Lagoinha Matriz n. d]. Valadão is also known for very controversial speeches on his social networks, mainly against minority groups, in addition to

being frequently associated with the spread of fake news. These two evangelical leaders, with countless followers in their churches and social networks, are examples of fundamentalists with great power of influence who have been directly involved in Brazilian politics, intensifying a simplistic and essentialist binary in social network discussions, which reached the complex theme of the war between Israel and Palestine, the latter being seen as “the evil” to be fought and the former “the good” that needs to be protected by prayers and bombings.

The biblical text cited in the image published by the leader of the Lagoinha church is Psalms, chapter 122, verses 6 to 9, found in countless publications by pro-Israel evangelicals. Below, we will reproduce the entire chapter, including the opening verses, from 1 to 9 [BibleGateway n. d.]:

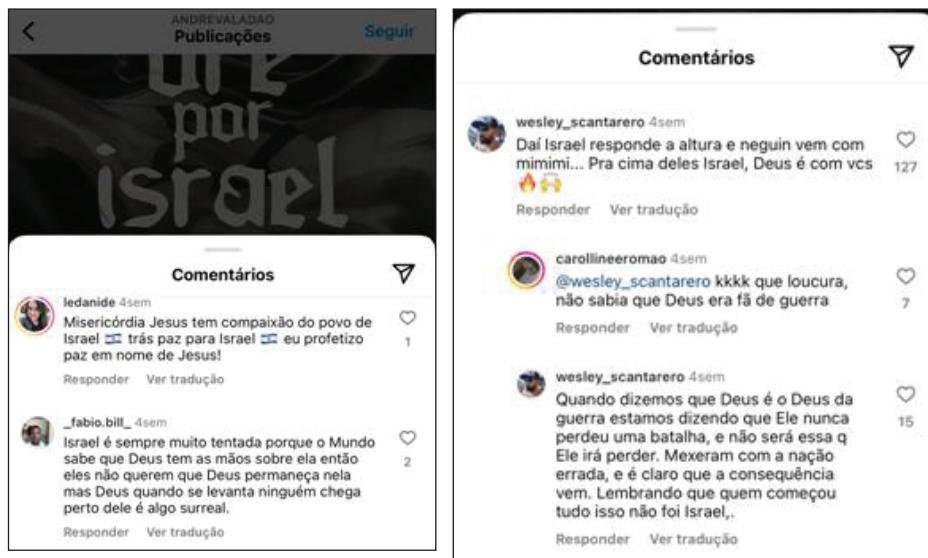
- 1 I rejoiced with those who said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the Lord.”
- 2 Our feet are standing
in your gates, Jerusalem.
- 3 Jerusalem is built like a city
that is closely compacted together.
- 4 That is where the tribes go up—
the tribes of the Lord—
to praise the name of the Lord
according to the statute given to Israel.
- 5 There stand the thrones for judgment,
the thrones of the house of David.
- 6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May those who love you be secure.
- 7 May there be peace within your walls
and security within your citadels.”
- 8 For the sake of my family and friends,
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
- 9 For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your prosperity¹⁷.

This text supports theories that the state of Israel that exists today is “the land promised by God” and, therefore, inviolable in its sovereignty. In this logic, Jerusalem is a fortress where the courts of justice are located; it is the house of God Himself, those who are sheltered within its walls are safe and, by transferring this biblical image to the present day, neo-Pentecostal fundamentalists groups make sacred and mythical complex political issues that have been going on since the end of World War II. It is a transposition of the places occupied in the conflict to the mobilization of these fundamentalist Christian groups, which begin to assume warlike rhetoric in their political conflict against other identities.

This type of “Christian Zionism” already existed in Brazil, however it gained strength especially during the administration of Jair Bolsonaro due to his alliance

¹⁷ The highlighted excerpt refers to the part of the biblical text cited in fig. 4.

with ultraconservative evangelicals. The former president cultivated a rapprochement with the State of Israel that was unprecedented in Brazilian foreign policy, which always sought a position, in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, of balance and respect for international treaties¹⁸.



Figs. 6 (left), 7 (right). Comments on the publication by pastor André Valadão in Instagram* (2024)

Translation of fig. 6:

[A]: Mercy Jesus, have compassion on the people of Israel <...> bring peace to Israel <...>

I prophesy peace in the name of Jesus!

[B]: Israel is always very tempted because the World knows that God has His hands on it so they don't want God to remain in it but when God rises up no one comes close to Him it's something surreal.

Translation of fig. 7:

[C]: Then Israel responds in kind and people come with mimimi¹⁹... Go after them Israel, God is with you

[D]: @<...> lol that's crazy, I didn't know God was a fan of war

[E]: When we say that God is the God of war, we are saying that He has never lost a battle, and this one will not be one of them. They messed with the wrong nation, and of course, the consequences are coming. Remember that Israel didn't start all of this.

¹⁸ It is worth noting that the current Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, demonstrated his solidarity with the Palestinian people and condemned the Israeli attacks for causing deaths, especially among the civilian population, comparing them to the Holocaust. Israel reacted to his statement by declaring Lula *persona non grata*, which in turn was responded to by the Brazilian government with the withdrawal of its ambassador from Israel. These events in politics between the two countries also strengthened these discursive clashes that we now analyze.

¹⁹ *Mimimi* is a common Brazilian expression that refers to a speech, usually a complaint, considered unjustified or irrelevant. It was appropriated by right-wing groups as a way of opposing themselves to the social rights issue, understood as unfounded demands/complaints.

The discursive clashes related to the conflict between the two Middle Eastern nations gained, on the online networks, the air of confrontation between fans, erasing all the historical complexity of an unequal war. The construction of an imaginary Jew and a mythical Israel — based on the association between the image of “the people chosen by God”, “the descendants of Abraham”, and the current political state of Israel — feeds the idea that any act in defense of Israeli territory is divinely justifiable and it strengthens when disseminated by religious leaders with great reach on online social networks, who begin to find echoes in their chambers:

In the comments taken from the publication analyzed previously (figs. 6 and 7), we also find the discursive construction that places Israel as the land over which “God has His hands”, so that “Jesus, have compassion on the people of Israel” and its defenders.

On the contrary, their opponents and enemies, who “don’t want God to remain in it”, “messed with the wrong nation, and of course the consequences follow”, so that the justifiable action is to “Go after them Israel, [because] God is with you.” Thus, the comments demonstrate how the construction of Israel as a “promised land” and “God’s people” and its consequent logic of destroying the enemy finds an echo among the followers of these public figures, strengthening itself as a political project.

This mix of religion and politics has a long history in Brazil, but it gained a new, even more influential, conservative and fundamentalist facet after the 2018 elections. Online social networks, as we have seen, play a very important role in maintaining this alliance, as, at the same time as they strengthened the repetition of single narratives, they made discussions on topics that could involve social spheres reach deeper levels, from the point of view of the people influenced, but, at the same time, very shallow, from the argumentative point of view, which is built on a binary logic based on biblical texts, that serves specific interests.

Final considerations

In many parts of the world, online digital media have taken on a major role in the political field, influencing the way in which relationships of otherness are constituted. Whether through its ability to establish contact between people from very different places almost instantly, or through the dissemination of information in echo chambers marked by the reinforcement of unique narratives, the power of intervention of discursive production, which starts from a configuration of the world and (re)updates it through rhetoric and repositioning, is undeniable.

In this article, we present some of the strategies of evangelical fundamentalist religious groups, part of the so-called “new Brazilian rights”, which mobilize specificities and resources of online social networks to propagate their “unique truths” and influence as many users as possible to have support in their interference in political-social issues. Over the last few years, these strategies have worked well, as we have seen the resurgence of hate speech against social minorities and their agendas, based on an essentialist and reductionist logic of otherness in which there is only good versus evil.

In the midst of this process, we realized that the Israel–Hamás–Palestine conflict, despite being located in a social, political, cultural and religious context quite different from the Brazilian one, has presented itself as a mobilizing element in discursive constructions. In our analyses, we were able to observe how fundamentalist groups, through publications on their social networks, appropriate this international conflict to update their warlike, binary and reductionist logic, taking advantage of a religious belief in the sacredness of the State of Israel.

Some clues miss certain idiosyncrasies of the religious groups that we highlight in this work: practitioners of Christianity who sacralize a people who do not believe in Jesus as Messiah; Christian fundamentalists who seem to ignore the difference between a pentagram and the Star of David. In this way, it is possible to infer that the political use of a biblical Israel has nothing to do with the practice of its religious dogmas, but rather with the propagation of the idea that good political leaders are those who defend Christian precepts.

Obviously, what we present here is just a snippet of this debate on social media. We try to show some of the ways that religion — especially neo-Pentecostal fundamentalist Protestantism — has been used to induce public opinion and, consequently, make religious leaders gain more and more space in Brazilian politics. There are still many other nuances in this complex panorama and, in this scenario, we believe it is essential to understand how these practices are updated, in order to enable other forms of political intervention, targeting respect for differences, equity and the strengthening of a democratic culture.

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