



Complicity and Synergy Between Bolsonaro and Brazilian Evangelicals in COVID-19 Times: Adherence to Scientific Negationism for Political-Religious Reasons

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the article discusses how a large part of the Brazilian evangelical churches resorted to informational disorder and disinformation as instruments to deny the severity of the disease. It also discusses how the production, endorsement, and support of false news served to establish a support platform for the President of the Republic of Brazil, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, with emphasis on the month of March, when the pandemic hit Brazil, until mid-April 2020, when religious leaders joined Bolsonaro in an Easter celebration.

Keywords Evangelical churches · Jair Messias Bolsonaro · Information disorder · Disinformation

Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Brazil (Aquino and Monteiro 2020), the country was already experiencing a serious and lasting crisis, characterized by great political, economic, and social instability. This phenomenon partly aligns with the economic and political crisis of major democracies in the world since at least 2008 (Badcock 2016; Piketty 2014; Žižek 2015; Roy 2015).

However, there are particularities in the Brazilian crisis. The severe recession between the years 2015 and 2016, during the term of President Dilma Roussef (Oreiro 2017), was followed by the democratic rupture through an impeachment process in 2016 (Braz 2017). Vice President Michel Temer took office with great unpopularity, and his

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government was marked by accusations of corruption and the failure of his reform agenda (Souza and Soares 2019). At the end of the Temer government, in the 2017 presidential elections, Lulopetism still showed some leadership, but faced a confluence formed by supporters and far-right activists, antipetists, and supporters of a more liberal economic policy. The result of the suffrage was the election of Jair Messias Bolsonaro, a former military man, a far-right deputy who served in the Chamber of Deputies between 1991 and 2018, and who resorted to political mythologies to build his public identity during the electoral race (Azevedo Junior and Bianco 2019).

The economic and political crisis persisted under the Bolsonaro government. Added to them is the worsening, in Brazil, of multiple attacks against Human Rights (Silva 2019), the holding of several anti-democratic demonstrations with the participation of the President of the Republic (Parzianello 2020), the dismantling of environmental protection policies (Fearnside 2019), the stimulus for the population to arm themselves (Ribeiro 2020), in addition to a reform agenda with the suppression of labor and social security rights (Jornal do Senado 2019).

The government's failures caused a significant drop in Bolsonaro's popularity (Datafolha 2020a). Still, such popularity has parked in the 30% range. The participants in the religious movement, mainly engaged in the election of President Jair Messias Bolsonaro, the evangelicals, form the group responsible for the stability of their popularity indexes (Datafolha 2020b).

Bolsonarism and the Brazilian Evangelical Movement: Synergies and Exchanges

The attraction of evangelical groups to Bolsonaro's support base is related to the historical banners of Brazilian Protestantism, which largely coincides with the Bolsonarist agenda. The intersection between the Bolsonarist and Evangelical agenda provided a synergy that extended to the strengthening and expansion of bonds through the exchange of interests and objectives between different groups.

The Bolsonaro government assumed for itself the defense of a series of moral values that have historically adhered to the table of values of Brazilian Protestants since the nineteenth century, especially the defense of the family, the fight against the profanity of folklore and national festivals, demonization of African and indigenous culture, and the fight against illicit drugs (Pesquisa Fapesp 2019). At the same time, Bolsonarism promoted new values among evangelical Christians, which were endorsed without great resistance, such as the policy of proliferation of weapons among "good citizens" (Paschoal 2020); the project of moralizing politics and education through its militarization (Pinheiro et al. 2019); and critical action against other powers of the Republic, at the same time that the Military Dictatorship of 1964–1985 is praised and Bolsonaro's political opponents are classified in the "communist" category (Camargo et al. 2020).

The neoliberal economic agenda has also become, with adherence to Bolsonarism, part of the belief system of most evangelicals (Py 2019, 2020). Neoliberalism since its origins operates through religious devices (Benjamin 1991). Neoliberalism promotes the corrosion of solidarity in the name of the belief in the self-regulation of the market, in the power of the minimum state, in freedom, and in meritocracy (Sung 2010). In the case of Bolsonarism, the liberal reforms promoted by the Minister of Finance,

economist Paulo Guedes, graduated from the Chicago School, is an old and outdated version of neoliberalism. Regarding ethical and democratic issues, Guedes' economic policy is indifferent or even adherent to the resurgence of an extreme right in tune with fascism, in Brazil and in the world (Tosi 2019). It is noteworthy that Paulo Guedes was a professor at the University of Chile during the Pinochet Dictatorship in Chile, which partly explains the harmony in the face of the unhitching between economic, social, and political liberalism under the Bolsonaro government. In short, the Bolsonaro government seeks to be liberal in the economy, but it is socially and politically reactionary.

Evangelical Support for Necropolitics and Christofascism: the Conditions of Existence of Scientific Negationism in the Face of COVID-19

Hugo Assmann (1994) highlighted, in view of the precarious economic situation of the poor in Latin American societies, that solidarity is a challenge of theology against the economic exclusion of contemporary capitalism. The problem is that the promoters of explanation and the theological response to the challenges of neoliberal capitalism eventually succumb to the insistence of the notion that diminishing rights is a necessary sacrifice to save the economy. Still, Assmann's analysis allows one to infer that solidarity is the key to the reaction against the precarious condition of the poor and against their abandonment to their own fate.

The precariousness of social policies and solidarity has become part of the Bolsonaro government's agenda since his inauguration. And if evangelicals are government partners in such precariousness, it means that solidarity has lost ground among those who should be its promoters (Almeida 2019; Brugot and Cormery 2019; Oliveira 2020).

Since evangelical religious are the main maintainers of the popularity of defenders of necropolitics (Mbembe 2018), they have become vectors of a modality of Cristofacism, or subscribed fascism, defended and proclaimed as part of the living of "Christian" values (Py 2019). Therefore, it is not surprising (but it is regrettable) that, in the face of an unprecedented health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, most evangelicals have succumbed to the discourse that creates a false impasse, based on the belief that, if the public health policies necessary to combat COVID-19 are applied, they will harm the economy (Campos 2020; Barreto et al. 2020; The Lancet 2020). Neoliberal logic operates here, as it considers that any instrument of social protection is harmful to the health of the economy, except for the help of speculators and the financial system. Moreover, the belief that aid to financiers will benefit everyone by extension is convenient for the richest, but fatal for the poorest. Recruiting evangelicals to promote this belief and make them proclaimers of it in the midst of a pandemic that also affects them, since evangelicals are mostly workers and poor, is an issue that needs to be clarified.

Notwithstanding Jesus' call to solidarity and love, Bolsonarism used religion as a political force (Benjamin 1991; Casanova 1994; Agamben 2011, 2012; Gasda 2015) to increase in Brazilian evangelical Christianity the idea that an unequal and predatory capitalism it is the solution to the world's problems. Much of these problems are, however, caused by capitalism itself. The uncritical adoption of capitalism as the solution of national problems by Brazilian evangelical Christians was added to racial and sanitary barbarism, which came to be publicly defended by Brazilian evangelical leaders.

The Anti-Christian Meanings of Evangelical Support for Neoliberal Capitalism

If multimillionaires, liberal economists, opportunistic politicians, and mainstream media conglomerates see the social iniquity of neoliberal capitalism as the path to their prosperity, evangelicals (with the exception of the pastors of prosperity theology) have so far made little profit from this agenda. It is an enigma, therefore, to identify how the passionate defense of evil in progress was made possible.

The devoted faith in the scheme in which religiously pious poor sacrifice themselves for understanding that God requires a punishing and demeaning morality against the dispossessed and wandering is an updated version of “be faithful in the little and the much I will place you” (Matthew 25.21). When such faith begins to provoke stigmas in the body of democracy, and begins to act against actions in favor of a better world, a dysfunctional Christianity is at work, which is viscerally based on an accomplice deity in its name. Such a deity orders the banishment of solidarity, prevents sharing, makes selfishness a duty. Such is certainly a Demiurge who has nothing to do with the God and Father of Jesus Christ proclaimed in the gospels read by evangelicals. Nor does it coincide with Jesus of Nazareth. The Christ of the Christofacism system is an antithesis, an antichrist, the god justifying the actions that cause death.

By assuming an ideology absolutely favorable to those who promote a “Robin Hood upside down” logic, the part of the evangelicals who embraced it became partners in what harms them, given their class status (Alves et al. 2017). The commitment is even greater when observing the low adherence of evangelicals to the defense of social justice in the face of racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia, and other social problems in Brazil.

There is also a lack of critical judgment by evangelicals against Bolsonaro’s reckless public policies in facing the COVID-19 pandemic. Bolsonaro took a denialist, populist, and religious approach, which constantly appeals to the divine. It includes in its necropolitics a spiritual mechanism that stimulates patriotism and requires faith and submission under the slogan “Brazil above all, God above all.” Examples of this can be found since the beginning of the Bolsonaro government in 2018: the government indicated that by taking away social security rights, people would have a better retirement; he argued that apart from workers’ rights, there would be decent work. And today, 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, the Brazilian federal government defends the acceptance of death and the “return to normality” in the biggest health crisis in the history of Brazil. Each time, the price of progress increases in its pocket version.

The History of the Bolsonaro Government’s Actions in the Management of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil and the Evangelical Negationist Engagement

From the Emergence of the Pandemic to the Recognition of Community Transmission: The Genesis of Government Support for the Virus

On March 11, 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) started treating the new coronavirus as a pandemic (World Health Organization 2020), the mismatch between the severity of the pandemic and the actions of the Bolsonaro government

began, in partnership with evangelicals and the military. The day before, on March 10, Bolsonaro spoke at an international conference in Miami without making any reference to the new coronavirus (Bolsonaro 2020c). On the same day that Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by WHO, the Special Secretariat of Communication (Secom) of the Bolsonaro government, ignoring the pandemic and the need for social isolation, released a call for public demonstrations against the National Congress and the Supreme Federal Court on the official Twitter of the organ, scheduled for March 15 (Secretaria Especial de Comunicação 2020). Concomitant to the government action to invite pro-government demonstrations, the Military Club of the Army, based in Rio de Janeiro, sent a statement to its members announcing the institution's support for anti-democratic acts (Agência Estado 2020).

Although the Bolsonaro government's focus is on trying to demonstrate popularity through pro-government demonstrations, there were actions within the government itself towards the construction of a public health crisis management policy. The initial reaction of the Ministry of Health, under the leadership of the then Minister of Health, Dr. Luiz Henrique Mandetta, was the establishment of Portaria No. 356, which provides for the regulation and operationalization of the provisions of Law No. 13,979, of February 6, 2020, which established measures to deal with the public health emergency of international importance resulting from the disease caused by the new coronavirus (COVID-19). The Ordinance established protocols for coping with the disease, providing for quarantine, isolation, and testing. Even so, Bolsonaro reinforced the call for demonstrations against the other powers of the republic: the National Congress and the Federal Supreme Court. In doing so, he promoted agglomerations across the country and implored, for political-ideological reasons, the Ministry of Health's own plan against COVID-19 (Bolsonaro 2020a).

A small retreat from Bolsonaro was noted on March 12. He held his usual weekly live on Facebook, and asked that the demonstrations scheduled for Sunday, March 15, be postponed. He was beside Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta and a Libras interpreter—and they all wore masks (Bolsonaro 2020b). Then, in a speech broadcast on TV and radio, Bolsonaro asked that the demonstrations of the 15th be postponed (Tvbrasilgov 2020a).

The following day, March 13, when the Brazilian Ministry of Health accounted for 107 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 1485 suspected cases,¹ the Ministry of Economy released an analysis of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Brazilian economy: reduced exports; drop in commodity prices and worsening terms of trade; interruption of the productive chain in some sectors; falling asset prices and worsening financial conditions; and reduction in the flow of people and goods (Government of Brazil 2020a).

Sunday, March 15, was marked by contradiction: President Bolsonaro participated in the anti-democratic demonstrations that he had guided so that they did not occur. On that day, there were already 200 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 1913 suspected cases. In the demonstrations against the National Congress and the Federal Supreme Court, the president had contact with at least 272 people, handled at least 128 cell phones, and greeted 140 people (Nomura 2020). By this time, 23 members of his government who had taken an entourage trip to the USA on March 7 had tested positive for COVID-19 (Uribe 2020). In trying to explain his participation in the demonstrations

¹ Data were obtained from the Ministry of Health of Brazil, through the website: <https://covid.saude.gov.br/>

in an interview with the TV station CNN Brasil, Bolsonaro defended the protests, exempted himself from responsibility for his summons and challenged the presidents of the Senate and of the Chamber, Davi Alcolumbre and Rodrigo Maia, respectively, to leave at streets and see how they would be received (CNN Brasil 2020).

On Monday, March 16, a video conference was held with heads of state from other South American countries to discuss the impacts of COVID-19 in the region (Coletta 2020). Bolsonaro did not participate in this meeting, nor in the meeting with the summit of the judicial courts, the presidents of Congress, and the minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta (Health), in the Supreme Federal Court (Assessoria de Comunicação da Presidência do STF 2020). On the same day, a study by the University of Oxford projected that the country could reach the mark of 478 thousand deaths, if the necessary measures to contain the disease were not taken (Dowd et al. 2020). At that time, everyone already knew about the severity of the disease, but Bolsonaro began to oppose more and more vehemently to the health crisis management policy. At most, announced economic measures were, in fact, pending adjustments, such as the inclusion of one million new families among Bolsa Família beneficiaries announced on March 1 and carried out on March 23 (Tvbrasil 2020b). The number of people included in the assistance program corresponded practically to the size of the queue of people waiting to enter the program. The government also adopted bailout measures of R \$75 billion for the financial, services, commercial, and agricultural system through Caixa Econômica Federal and Banco do Brasil, the country's two main public banks (Governo do Brasil 2020b).

The beginning of the militarization of the management of the health crisis began on March 16, when Bolsonaro established the Crisis Committee for “supervision and monitoring of the impacts” of the new coronavirus and informed that the group would be commanded by General Walter Braga Netto, head of the Casa Civil (Governo do Brasil 2020c). Bolsonaro began to value negationist positions, such as those of the substitute CEO of Anvisa (Agência Nacional de Vigilância Sanitária), medical admiral Antonio Barra Torres, who not only defended the easing of the quarantine, but was alongside Bolsonaro in the demonstrations. Sunday, March 15th. It was Anvisa that on March 18 did not pass on to Brazilian international airports, such as Guarulhos and Brasília, the protocol for screening passengers arriving from abroad. Anvisa also prevented state agents from Bahia from measuring the temperature of passengers arriving in Salvador, mainly from São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (Agência Nacional de Vigilância Sanitária 2020).

Denialism continued to expand under the Bolsonaro government. On March 17, the Minister of Education, Abraham Weintraub, published a video on his social networks asking health students to return to classes amid the coronavirus pandemic (Weintraub 2020). The following day, March 18, when Brazil had 647 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and seven deaths, the Chamber of Deputies approved the government project that declared a state of public calamity in Brazil due to the pandemic of the new coronavirus. While the project was approved, federal deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro (Bolsonaro 2020e), son of the president of the republic Jair Bolsonaro, despite following his father's speech to minimize the pandemic, blamed China for the health crisis, generating a strong reaction from the Chinese ambassador in Brazil, Yang Wanming (Embaixada da China no Brasil 2020). This added another factor to the Brazilian crisis: xenophobia against its main trading partner. The effects of the Brazilian government's difficulties in establishing an efficient crisis management policy was reflected in the

CNN Brasil survey, carried out by the consultancy Atlas Político, which showed that 64% of the population disapproved of the plan to combat COVID-19 adopted by the Bolsonaro government. The same survey showed that 80% of the population considered that the health system was not prepared to support the increase in patients, and that 73% estimated that the situation in the country would worsen (Junqueira 2020).

Measures continued to be taken to control the spread of the disease. On March 19, an ordinance issued by the Casa Civil restricted, for 30 days, foreigners from eight countries to enter Brazil by air. The list was defined based on a survey prepared by the National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa) and did not include the USA (Portaria No. 125, of March 19, 2020). At the same time that combat measures were being taken, there were suspicions of corruption and overpricing in the purchase of equipment, medicines, and other health supplies. On March 19, the Ministry of Health hired, without bidding, a company linked to the financing of electoral campaigns of Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta, Cirumed Comércio Ltda. (Rezende 2020). The Brazilian Ministry of Health declared COVID-19's state of community transmission nationwide on March 20, three weeks after registering the first imported case from COVID-19 (Portaria No. 454, of March 20, 2020). Even so, Bolsonaro, in a videoconference with businessmen, criticized the Brazilian governors on account of the measures adopted to combat the new coronavirus (Tvbrasilgov 2020c). Thus, the politicization of health crisis management began. Bolsonaro, becoming an ally of the business community, began to preach the full return of economic activities and take advantage of the situation to fight political enemies quoted for the candidacy for the Presidency of the Republic in 2022: the governors of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel, and of São Paulo, João Doria.

The Legal Dispute over Public Health Policies in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Bolsonaro Against Governors, Mayors, Ministry of Health, and Workers

The publication, on February 3, 2020, of the Ministry of Health, the Portaria No. 188, represents the beginning of the Brazilian Ministry of Health's measures against COVID-19. The ordinance declared the Public Health Emergency of National Importance (ESPIN) due to Human Infection with the New Coronavirus. Three days later, Federal Law No. 13,979, of February 6, 2020, was published, which provided for measures to address the public health emergency of international importance. With the spread of the disease and the declaration by the World Health Organization on March 11 that COVID-19 had become a pandemic, the Chamber of Deputies on March 18 and the Federal Senate on March 21 recognized the existence of a public calamity for the purposes of article 65 of Lei Complementar Federal No. 101, of May 4, 2000, which establishes public finance rules aimed at responsibility in fiscal management and takes other measures. Thus, the government could break the budget to face the COVID-19 pandemic.

States and municipalities began to adjust to the challenges of the pandemic, preventing the holding of services in general, including evangelical services. The Decree of the Governor of the State of São Paulo No. 64,862, of March 13, 2020, received an amendment on March 20, preventing the functioning of places of worship and their liturgies. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, Decree 47,282 of March 21, additional measures were determined to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro enacted Decree No. 46980 of March 19, which updates measures to deal with the spread resulting from the new coronavirus (COVID-19) as

a result of the health emergency. Two days later, March 21, Brazil had already registered 1128 cases of COVID-19 and 18 deaths.

The Federal Government's reaction was *Medida Provisória* (Provisional Measure) 926/20, of March 20, 2020, which amended law 13979/19, which allowed the states of the federation to take emergency measures in spite of the Federal Government. According to the text of Bolsonaro's *Medida Provisória*, only the president would be competent to determine measures such as the closure of airports and federal highways. The following day, in a videoconference with mayors of large Brazilian cities, Bolsonaro again said that the COVID-19 pandemic was part of "a very great alarmism by a large part of the media," criticizing the comparison of numbers between Brazil and Italy (Carta Capital 2020). On the same day, Ian Bremmer, founder and president of the Eurasia Group, one of the most important consultancies in the world on political risk, said in his Twitter account: "There's plenty of competition, but most ineffective world leader responding to coronavirus right now goes to Brazil President Bolsonaro" (Bremmer 2020).

In another measure to combat public policies to protect the population, the federal government made an administrative request to take possession of lung ventilators acquired by the City of Recife (Fonsêca 2020), and only a decision by the Fifth Federal Regional Court allowed the Municipality from Recife the possession of lung ventilators purchased to assist hospitalized patients. On March 23, the Ministry of Health banned the export of pulmonary ventilators and requested all national production of the equipment, which meant that the production of the respirator industry needed authorization from the Ministry to be sold, even if to organs of national healthcare (Amorim 2020). The second half of March 2020 was therefore marked by the COVID-19 fight by governors, mayors, and the Ministry of Health; and Bolsonaro's fight against governors, mayors, and the Ministry of Health.

Bolsonaro also began to fight workers and act to reduce labor rights. A set of *Medida Provisória* was issued by the federal government as of March 23, with the objective of removing workers' rights under the justification of preserving jobs.

On March 20, Bolsonaro issued *Medida Provisória* 927, 2020, which authorized the suspension of the employment contract for up to four months, with suspension of employees' wages, strong opposition to government actions began. The strong reaction led to the publication of *Medida Provisória* 928 on March 23, which revoked Article 18 of *Medida Provisória* 927, which dealt with the suspension of wages.

On the same day, the Federal Court in Rio de Janeiro suspended parts of the presidential decree that made the rules of isolation more flexible, classifying religious and lottery activities as essential services. The decision was made by federal judge Márcio Santoro Rocha, from the 1st Federal Court of Duque de Caxias (*Ação Civil Pública* 5002814-73.2020.4.02.5118). On March 31, in response to the *Ação Civil Pública* (ACP) formulated by the attorney of the Republic Felipe Fritz Braga, of the Attorney of the Republic in the Federal District (PRDF), the federal judge Manoel Pedro Martins de Castro Filho, of the 6th Court of Brasília, determined that the Bolsonaro government should adopt measures to prevent religious activities of any kind from remaining included in the list of essential activities and services for the purpose of tackling the public health emergency arising from the coronavirus.

At the same time that the Bolsonaro government was advancing the withdrawal of rights, reparative and protective actions were initiated by the other powers. On May 4,

2020, the Supreme Federal Court ruled that Article 29 of Medida Provisória 927 was illegal, which stated that cases of contamination by the new coronavirus would not be “considered occupational, except upon proving the causal link”—a flagrant attack on dignity and workers’ rights.

Even in the face of opposition and the action of the judiciary against the Provisional Measures that left workers in the COVID-19 pandemic unassisted, Bolsonaro continued to issue Provisional Measures in his crusade against labor rights, using the seriousness of the illness he denied as a justification, in other contexts, being serious, a clear contradiction. On April 1, he issued the Medida Provisória 936, which allowed the reduction of working hours and workers’ wages for 3 months, part of the wage reduction offset by the government at a cost of R \$51 billion. Finally, the drastic economic measures against a disease whose gravity was denied by the president show that Bolsonaro’s public speeches about COVID-19 were part of a political strategy to oppose his political opponents, with a clear prejudice to the poorest population.

Realizing the possibility of facing legal implications because of the deaths caused by the coronavirus in Brazil, on May 14, Bolsonaro issued the Medida Provisória 966, which freed public officials from responsibility for any “action and omission” in “acts related to the pandemic COVID-19.” On May 21 of the same year, the Supreme Federal Court was provoked by Ação Direta de Inconstitucionalidade 6421, filed by the Rede Sustentabilidade party; Ação Direta de Inconstitucionalidade 6422, filed by the Partido Cidadania; Ação Direta de Inconstitucionalidade 6424, filed by the Partido Socialismo e Liberdade; Ação Direta de Inconstitucionalidade 6425, filed by the Partido Comunista do Brasil (ADI 6425); Ação Direta de Inconstitucionalidade 6427, filed by the Associação Brasileira de Imprensa; Ação Direta de Inconstitucionalidade 6428, filed by the Partido Democrático Trabalhista (ADI 6428); and Ação Direta de Inconstitucionalidade 6431, filed by the Partido Verde (6431). All of these actions questioned the government’s Provisional Measure to protect public officials from accountability during the pandemic. The Supreme Court’s decision was that the legislation could not serve to shield administrative acts made against medical and scientific recommendations. Ministers also voted to maintain the prediction that public managers should only respond in the civil and administrative spheres of Justice when they “act or omit with intent or gross error,” as provided by the Provisional Measure. However, they defined that measures against technical norms and criteria established by health authorities and health organizations in Brazil and the world should be included as “gross error.” This figure illustrates the Bolsonaro government’s awareness that its conduct in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic can be considered a crime, and demonstrates the reaction of the powers against the president’s attempt to shield himself from criminal responsibilities.

Bolsonaro Against the Press: the Restriction of Information as the Possibility of Establishing a War of Narratives

March 23 was marked by the start of Bolsonaro’s attempt to control the disclosure of measures related to fighting the new coronavirus pandemic. On this day, Bolsonaro guided the ministries to submit all communications about COVID-19 to the Presidency’s Secretaria de Comunicação (Secom) “so that there is unification of the narrative” (Spigariol 2020). The text was signed by the Chief Minister of the Civil

House, General Walter Souza Braga Netto, who said he was tasked by Bolsonaro to inform that all interviews given to the press should have prior coordination between the agencies and that all official notes could only be disclosed after Secom's endorsement. Bolsonaro also emptied the Crisis Committee for Supervision and Monitoring the Impacts of COVID-19, created by Decree 10.277 of March 16, 2020, submitting all the choices to compose it to the Chief Minister of the Civil House—namely, a military man (Decree 10,289, of 24 March 2020, Article 1, paragraph 1).

Also noteworthy is the attempt, by the Bolsonaro government, to restrict access to information on coping policies to COVID-19 through of the Medida Provisória 928, of March 23, 2020, which indefinitely suspended the deadlines for responding to agencies and entities that received requests for access to information. The Federal Supreme Court, provoked by the Direct Action of Unconstitutionality required by the Federal Council of the Bar Association of Brazil, decided on April 30, 2020, to unanimously overturn the validity of this Provisional Measure (Supremo Tribunal Federal 2020).

On March 24, at a press conference, the Ministry of Health reported that underreporting of the number of coronavirus cases in the country reached 86% (Ministério da Saúde 2020a). On the same day, Bolsonaro decided to make a statement in which he attacked the press and again minimized the danger of COVID-19, calling the disease a “little cold.” In his speech, Bolsonaro also declared that the country's routine should return to “reality” and that the Brazilian press helped to start the panic around COVID-19. Bolsonaro highlighted the large number of elderly people in Italy and the cold climate, which would be the explanation for the large number of cases, information that would be being withheld by the media. He also accused the press of spreading the “feeling of dread” and “real hysteria.” Bolsonaro questioned in his pronouncement the closure of schools, indicated that only the elderly over 60 should be concerned and said that, due to his track record as an athlete, he would not need to worry, because he would feel nothing. He also released the chloroquine research done by the American FDA and the Albert Einstein Hospital in São Paulo, and cited positive news about the use of the drug, without indicating the source (Planalto 2020a).

The day after the announcement, March 25, when Brazil had 2433 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 57 deaths, began with Bolsonaro's attacks on journalists and governors at the door of the Palácio da Alvorada. He stated that “the action of the governors is a crime,” specifically denouncing the actions of the governors of São Paulo, João Doria, and Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel, calling his measures “demagogues.” He also insinuated that the left was preparing a coup and argued that, in order to get around this situation, Brazil needed to “return to economic production,” claiming to follow what the US President Donald Trump also intended. He said other viruses killed more than COVID-19, defended chloroquine, saying it was 100% effective against the new coronavirus from reports he heard, said he was not concerned about its popularity, said he needed to follow the true, following the biblical text of John 8.32 and stated that money would be lacking to pay public servants. He said that people who die from COVID-19 would also die from H1N1. He indicated that the risk for those who do not have problems with comorbidities is almost zero. He also informed that he would meet with the Minister of Health, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, to talk about what he called “vertical isolation,” which had as its objective only the isolation of elderly people or those with comorbidities. He called cowards those who wished to stay at home, and compared the coronavirus to a rain, saying it was necessary to face “with or without an umbrella” (Jair Messias Bolsonaro 2020).

The reaction of 26 governors was the signing, on the same day, of a letter with demands to the federal government to face the pandemic of the new coronavirus. On the same day, Amnesty International also issued a positioning note on President Bolsonaro's speech on March 24, stating: "the Brazilian State has an obligation to guarantee the necessary protection for all and all of us ... Scientific evidence, the recommendations of the world health authorities and the facts show the gravity of COVID-19 for the health and health systems of all countries" (Anistia Internacional 2020).

On March 26, when Brazil had 2915 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 77 deaths, the federal government launched an advertising campaign called "Brazil cannot stop" to defend the easing of social isolation and economic recovery. On the same day, seven former ministers of health signed a letter expressing their rejection of Bolsonaro's statements defending the end of social isolation, a practice used worldwide to combat the coronavirus and the main recommendation of experts. The advertising piece was banned by an injunction by the Minister of the Supreme Federal Court, Luís Roberto Barroso, who responded to the *Arguição de Descumprimento de Preceito Fundamental* 669, required by the *Rede Sustentabilidade* party (Barroso 2020).

On March 26, the Chamber of Deputies approved a bill that guaranteed an emergency income of 600 to 1200 reais per family for self-employed workers, informal and without fixed income during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government had initially proposed R \$200 per person. On March 30, the Senate Plenary approved emergency aid (Projeto de Lei 1.066 / 2020), during, at first, 3 months, which was sanctioned on April 1 by Bolsonaro.

On March 27, when Brazil had 3417 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 92 deaths, Bolsonaro used a highly rated television program, *Brasil Urgente*, to question the death toll from COVID-19, accused the fraud in the presentation of data on contaminated and killed by governors for "political use," directly quoting the governor of São Paulo, João Doria. In addition, he again called the pandemic "little cold" and said that the deaths in Italy (which reached 10,000) were not caused by the new coronavirus, but by the cold and the age of Italians (*Brasil Urgente* 2020a). Bolsonaro also used article 486 of the *Consolidação das Leis do Trabalho* (CLT) to launch a new attack on state and municipal representatives, saying that governors and mayors will have to compensate businessmen who had to close their doors to flatten the COVID-contamination curve. 19 (Consultor Jurídico 2020). In doing so, Bolsonaro intensified the war of narratives, using the media itself for this.

The condition of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, worsened. On March 27, Fiocruz (Fundação Oswaldo Cruz), Brazil's main research center in the Health field, defended the policy of home isolation as a strategy to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, isolation daily questioned by President Bolsonaro (Fiocruz 2020). At that time, on March 30, an estimate from the Ministry of Health, recorded in an internal document, showed that 17 federation units had more than 70% of their ICU beds occupied. The worst occupancy rates for ICU beds were in Mato Grosso do Sul (90.8%), Paraná (90%), and Minas Gerais (88.5%). The best were from the Federal District (59.1%), Amazonas (61%), and Acre (62%). Rio appeared with 68.5%, and the average for Brazil was 78%. The mapping was done with "information provided by the entities," in reference to the instances and bodies that can regulate ICU beds in the country, such as states and municipalities (Mariz and Souza 2020).

The Manipulation of the World Health Organization's Speech and the Chloroquine Controversy

On March 30, the Senate also approved the Projeto de Lei 786, which authorized, exceptionally, during the period of suspension of classes due to an emergency or public calamity, the distribution of foodstuffs purchased with the Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE) to parents or guardians of students in public schools of basic education. On the same day, Bolsonaro announced that the chemical laboratories of the Armed Forces would expand the production of chloroquine and gel alcohol, despite the lack of conclusive results on the use of the substance against COVID-19 (Governo do Brasil 2020d).

On March 31, 2020, when Brazil had 5717 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 201 deaths, Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta said that risky measures would not be taken to loosen the coronavirus's social isolation and stressed that informal workers would receive government help so that they could comply with the recommendations, despite Bolsonaro's advocacy for people to return to work. In view of the spread of contagions by the new coronavirus, the president of the Conselho Nacional de Justiça (CNJ), Minister Dias Toffoli, and the Minister of Health, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, signed the Portaria Conjunta No. 1, of March 30, 2020, which authorized burial and cremation of people without the need for a death certificate. The move came after Mandetta himself told governors that it was time to prepare funeral homes for the likely increase in COVID-19's fatalities. Bolsonaro returned to make a statement to the nation, citing that he would employ the Armed Forces in the task of fighting COVID-19, which he called "the challenge of the generation." He also mentioned the loss of life that will be caused by COVID-19, without mentioning, however, the importance of reducing social circulation to curb the spread of the disease, in addition to distorting a statement by WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, to say that he was right to defend the end of the confinement. He also said the need to save lives and jobs (Planalto 2020b).

On April 1, when Brazil had 6836 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 241 deaths, Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta said that part of the purchases that would be made by Brazil for personal protective equipment for use in the health network were canceled after the USA purchased a large volume of products from China. Mandetta also made another appeal for the population to adopt isolation and avoid crowds, during a press conference. According to the minister, there was great concern about the shortage of hospital personal protective equipment, due to the crisis of the new coronavirus (Tvbrasilgov 2020d). On the other hand, Bolsonaro, in an interview with presenter José Luiz Datena, from TV Bandeirantes, defended that younger people—up to 40 years old—should be infected so that there would be no outbreak of the disease in winter. He also said that he had a meeting with doctors, who defended the use of chloroquine; claimed that COVID-19 is like rain and some will drown; reported that no child in the world up to 9 years old died from COVID-19, without indicating a source, and those who die, being young, are weaker because of nature, from hunger (Brasil Urgente 2020b).

On April 2, the newspaper Estado de São Paulo found that six Brazilian states buried about 500 bodies without knowing the real cause of these deaths. State health departments were still investigating the causes of the deaths. In São Paulo (108 cases), Rio de Janeiro (49), Bahia (5), and Minas Gerais (45) (O Estado de São Paulo 2020). Even with

the indication of the spread of the disease, Bolsonaro not only continued to claim that people who died of other diseases were buried as if they had coronavirus, but he also determined that the employees of the Planalto Palace under the age of sixty should return to work in person, which caused the resignation of Felipe Cascaes Sabino Bresciani, Deputy Executive Deputy Chief of the Legal Affairs Sub-section of the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic (Portaria No. 143 of March 25, 2020). In addition, the president gathered a group of doctors at the Planalto Palace to comment on the outbreak of the new coronavirus without the presence of his Minister of Health, Mandetta. The president was told that he should maintain social isolation, and that chloroquine should not be recommended by him. Later, Bolsonaro, in an interview with Jovem Pan radio, said that he had a decree “ready on the table” to suspend the quarantine and that he did not want to dismiss Mandetta, but he accused the minister of lack of humility and stressed that “no minister is indelible.” In the interview, Bolsonaro cited pastor Silas Malafaia, and the video recorded in communities in Rio de Janeiro showing the functioning trade. He claimed that many should be contaminated (sic), and that trade should all be reopened, because isolation is a lie. Bolsonaro also announced a fast, indicating that he was advised by religious to do so, and repeated death figures in Italy similar to those previously cited by Silas Malafaia (Joven Pan 2020).

On April 3, the Chamber of Deputies approved, in two rounds, the Proposta de Emenda à Constituição (PEC) 10/2020, dubbed “PEC of the War Budget,” which creates a council chaired by President Bolsonaro to manage an exclusive parallel budget to combat COVID-19. The text also gives the Central Bank the power to buy credits without the use of intermediaries. The following day, Brazil recorded 10,278 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 432 deaths. Bolsonaro again said that he is negotiating with India for inputs for the production of hydroxychloroquine in Brazil (Bolsonaro 2020d), despite the fact that the drug does not have scientifically proven effectiveness against COVID-19, and again said that he wanted to end social isolation (Bolsonaro 2020a).

On April 5, when Brazil had 11,130 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 486 deaths, a group of Bolsonar Christians broke the social isolation quarantine, a measure adopted by the Ministry of Health to flatten the coronavirus spread curve, and went to door of the Palace of Alvorá, official residence of the president, to pray for Bolsonaro (Blog do Noblat 2020).

On April 6, when Brazil registered 12,056 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 553 deaths, Bolsonaro invited former minister, doctor, and federal deputy Osmar Terra, critical of the social and parliamentary isolation that most published false news about COVID-19, for lunch at the Palácio do Planalto (Congresso em Foco 2020). Under pressure, the Brazilian Ministry of Health recommended that states and cities little affected by the COVID-19 pandemic could begin to loosen their social isolation measures from April 13 (Ministério da Saúde 2020b). That same day, a study by a high strategic body of the Army’s General Staff, the Centro de Estudos Estratégicos do Exército (CEEEx), pointed to the social isolation, already adopted by governors and mayors, as the most effective measure to avoid the propagation of COVID-19, contrary to Bolsonaro’s position on the best strategy to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was taken offline (Exame 2020).

On April 7, when Brazil had 13,717 thousand confirmed cases of coronavirus and 667 deaths, the Minister of Health, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, refused to sign a decree in preparation by the Bolsonaro government that authorized the use of hydroxychloroquine

and chloroquine drugs for use in critically ill patients infected with the new coronavirus. The matter was discussed at a meeting at the Palácio do Planalto with doctors Luciano Dias Azevedo and Nise Yamaguchi (Iniciativa FIS 2020). The following day, a meeting between the Minister of Health and the President at the Palácio do Planalto left uncertainty about Mandetta's future in charge of the portfolio (Agenda do Presidente 2020). On the same day, Bolsonaro gave a telephone interview to the presenter of *Brasil Urgente*, from Band, José Luiz Datena, Bolsonaro again defended the reopening of trade and, in particular, the use of hydroxychloroquine (*Brasil Urgente* 2020c). Later, in a statement on national television and radio, the president stated that his ministers should be in sync with him and praised the use of hydroxychloroquine for the treatment against COVID-19, even without decisive studies proving the effectiveness of the medication (Planalto 2020c).

On April 9, the president and founder of the Eurasia Group, Ian Bremmer, again criticized Bolsonaro and recommended his clients to keep Brazil away from investment possibilities. For him, Bolsonaro is a risk for the country (Deutsche Welle 2020). That same day, late in the afternoon, without wearing a mask and wearing a suit and tie, Bolsonaro caused a crowd at the door of a bakery in Brasília's North Wing. Later, in his weekly live, Bolsonaro again externalized his dissatisfaction against Luiz Henrique Mandetta, Minister of Health (Jair Bolsonaro 2020a). So far, Brazil has registered 17,857 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and 941 deaths.

The Worsening of Health, the Search for Support, and the International Reaction Against the Bolsonaro Government's Measures

With the death toll advancing beyond that predicted by Bolsonaro—the president claimed that not even 800 people would die (TV do povo 2020)—the economic impacts of the health crisis began to worsen. According to DIEESE, the COVID-19 pandemic created an even more complex economic scenario, whose recession could reach the level of 8.5% in GDP in 2020. On the other hand, even though inflation in March remained at 0.07%, food prices increased 1.4% in March (DIEESE 2020). The Bolsonaro government's assessment also indicated a low, while the approval of the Ministry of Health grew significantly (Datafolha 2020c).

Bolsonaro then adopted measures to approximate his electoral bases. To get close to the evangelicals, who form the majority at his base (Almeida 2019), Bolsonaro called for a fast for the country. Fasting is an instrument used by religious, especially Pentecostals, to strengthen themselves in the fight against evil (Mariz 1999; Das 2008). Pentecostal and Neopentecostal Christians often link their daily problems to a spiritual battle, and calling for a fast against a serious illness is an effective way to approach this group.

On April 10, even with 19,943 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 1074 deaths, Bolsonaro went in search of his electorate: he went out again and caused agglomeration in the streets of the federal capital. His itinerary included a visit to the Armed Forces Hospital, a visit to a pharmacy, hugs to supporters, contrary to the guidelines of the Ministry of Health and WHO (Jair M. Bolsonaro 2020f). He, however, denounced the press for not respecting social isolation, as journalists flock to record the president's steps (Jair M. Bolsonaro 2020b).

If the actions in search of increased popularity were daily, Brazil became one of the countries that performed less tests to detect the disease and the country with the highest

transmission rate (Magenta 2020). When Brazil reached 20,727 confirmed cases and 1141 deaths on April 11, Bolsonaro reposted on social media a video published on March 25, in which he defended the easing of social isolation (Jair Bolsonaro 2020b), and dozens of supporters of Bolsonaro took a drive through the streets of São Paulo to show support for him in driving the crisis of the COVID-19 and to criticize Rede Globo, TV Bandeirantes, China, the Minister of Health Mandetta and the governor of São Paulo, João Doria—all Bolsonaro's opponents (Pereira 2020).

The reactions of the international community were immediate. On April 11, the Italian Embassy in Brazil issued a communiqué asking for Italian citizens residing or visiting Brazil to return “as soon as possible” to the country of origin (Consolato d'Italia 2020). The NGO Human Rights Watch criticized President Bolsonaro's performance in the health crisis due to the new coronavirus and stated that, in addition to acting in an “irresponsible” manner, the president has put Brazilians in “grave danger” (Human Rights Watch 2020).

The Genesis of the Evangelicals' Option for Negationism

The links between evangelicals and Bolsonarism took on new shapes with the advent of COVID-19. The support of a large portion of evangelicals to Bolsonaro has intensified and has become part of the religious identity of many groups, stimulated by their leaders.

Among Brazilian evangelicals, there are different movements, orientations, denominations, theologies, different political orientations. Today, three out of ten Brazilians aged 16 and over are evangelicals, with 22% of the Brazilian population consisting of Pentecostal and Neopentecostal evangelicals, mostly linked, respectively, to the Assembleia de Deus Church, the Universal do Reino de Deus Church, the Congregação Cristã do Brasil and the Evangelho Quadrangular Church (Datafolha 2016).

The main Pentecostal media leader is the pastor of the Assembleia de Deus, Silas Malafaia, president of the Conselho dos Ministros Evangélicos do Brasil (CIMEB), an entity with more than eight thousand pastors from almost all Brazilian evangelical denominations. Silas Malafaia is the owner of the Central Gospel publishing house and since 1982 has presented the television program “Vitória em Cristo.” Silas Malafaia is the leader of the hegemonic segment of Brazilian evangelicals, with great influence in all spheres of public power and representation in legislative houses in the city of Rio de Janeiro, in the state of Rio de Janeiro and in the Chamber of Deputies in Brasília.

Silas Malafaia's public speeches became the main public reference in support of Bolsonaro. Malafaia's rhetoric has, for the past 20 years, been at the service of influence with evangelicals, both to define votes in elections and to form the political opinion of the faithful. He acts as an opinion leader (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944), whose rhetoric of intransigence (Hirschman 1995) creates friend-enemy oppositions (Schmitt 1992). He assumes that he programmatically seeks to influence the electorate, to interfere in the process of forming voting attitudes and maintaining the ruler who represents his interests. Malafaia's links with Bolsonarism are intimate, and intensified during the COVID-19 epidemic, which illustrates the tendency of its audience, whose adherence to the support indicated by the pastor explains, in great measure, the maintenance of the popularity indexes of Bolsonaro, despite his controversial measures.

The main channel for public positioning of Silas Malafaia during the health crisis in COVID-19 is YouTube, where he has more than 1 million subscribers on his channel, “Silas Malafaia Oficial.” Malafaia used this audience to amplify, in several videos, support for the federal government in facing the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first video from Silas Malafaia’s YouTube channel about COVID-19 was published on March 12, 2020. In the video, Malafaia said that everyone, just and unjust, is likely to be sick. He then accused social media of promoting chaos. Malafaia recommended that the guidelines of the Ministry of Health and the Brazilian Society of Infectologists be followed. He claimed from a note from the Brazilian Society of Infectologists that there should be no social isolation in cities with less than 1000 confirmed cases, ignoring that the note did not recommend the use of chloroquine, or even indicating that 15% of the cases in disease are serious (Sociedade Brasileira de Infectologia 2020). The solution proposed by the pastor to save the Brazilian people, the Brazilian nation, and the family is prayer, and there is no need for further interventions on the social routine (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020a).

On March 14, Silas Malafaia said that the difficulty is the time when faith must be manifested. He indicated that he would not close the church, calling it “the people’s last stronghold of hope.” He claimed that Italian Catholic churches were closed and then reopened by the pope because they are fundamental (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020b). In fact, an Italian government decree, the increase in deaths (on March 13, 1016 deaths) and cases (15,000 deaths so far) motivated the Italian Episcopal Conference to suspend ecclesiastical activities on March 12, to date government decree, April 3); and the next day, the pope the next day announced that some parishes would remain open to give religious assistance to the faithful (Chieza Cattolica Italiana 2020). Malafaia also claimed the authorities’ concern with proletarian areas, informed that he would not compel people to go to church, advised about risk groups, went back to saying about the functioning of public transport, shopping malls, markets, questioned the reason for the closure only of the churches while other services are open, he claimed that “this account will not fall on us,” called excessive health concerns in the face of the health crisis “crazy neuro.”

On March 17, Silas Malafaia established a parallel between panic, which reduces immune defenses, and faith, according to him, “the most powerful agent of the spirit,” being as important as the other measures against COVID-19. From that, he informed that he would not decrease services or close the churches, unless public transport, shopping malls, and other activities were stopped. He recommended to government officials that a task force act to clean public transport means, and claimed that if the disease expanded, it would still leave an open door to serve people (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020c).

On March 18, Malafaia declared, starting with article 5, item VI of the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil that governors and mayors could not close churches without judicial determination. He also said that churches are therapeutic and that the new coronavirus is fought with a good immune system and that faith strengthens the body’s defenses. He denounced the existence of trapped and fearful pastors, mentioned the civil disobedience of the early Christians and affirmed the need for the churches to be open to serve people (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020d). In another video, on the same day, Malafaia criticized pastors who accused those who did not close churches of practicing civil disobedience. He mentioned the overcrowding of

public transport and claimed that if all things were closed, he would stop the services and stay in the church serving people with the pastors of his denomination, the Assembly of God Victory in Christ. He even claimed that if someone sick went to church, he would be attended to, and he called attention to the need for emotional balance, recommending the faithful to stop watching trash on television, which would contaminate the mind with bad news. He indicated without sources, in relation to Europe and Italy, that 60,000 people died of influenza in Europe in 2018, and that Italy is the second country with the highest number of elderly people in the world. He mentioned the need to clean buses, indicated that the church should not close if public transport is full, and mentioned a biblical episode related to the courage to indicate the need for faith in the face of the pandemic, instead of living a “vagabond faith.” Malafaia also indicated that ending activities for 30 days would cause weakened organisms, which would facilitate the contagion of what he called “plague.” He accused the governor of Bahia of threatening the church and again said that churches should remain open because faith improves the immune system (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020e).

Still on March 18, Malafaia counters an accusation that resistance to closing churches is related to financial interest. He claimed that his church’s tithing and offering collection technology means that there is no need for face-to-face meetings. He repeated that he will continue with churches open while there is full circulation of public transport. He made reference to the archbishop of São Paulo, who determined that churches should be open and claimed the good that faith does for the immune system (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020f).

On March 19, Malafaia said that if any state decrees a state of calamity, it will suspend services. He also said he respected court orders, but he will understand that exclusive orders for the Assembleia de Deus Vitória em Cristo Church, his religious denomination, will be understood by him as persecution (MPRJ 2020). He gave guidance on risk groups and reported the reduction of activities, and said that if everything closes, he will leave a door open and will even pray for those who arrive with COVID-19. He repeated that the church is an emotional hospital, and said that panic is devastating to the immune system, a poison. He mentioned the buses again and asked if any prosecutors who eventually want to close the churches to prevent the contagion of COVID-19, whether he will ask for a bus reduction. He indicated that the governors recommended, not ordered, the closing of the churches because they recognize their importance. In the prayer made, Malafaia stated “the blood of Christ is the greatest immunizing power that exists, we are covered by the blood of Jesus” (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020g). On the same day, in another video, he urged people to face fear and recommended that “nothing bad about coronavirus” be passed on through social media. He again used the argument that panic decreases the body’s defenses, and that fear needs to be faced (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020h).

On March 20, he repeated the three reasons for stopping the service: State of Emergency decree, drastic reduction in public transport and court decision. He reported that the mayor and governor reduced public transport, which is why he would be suspending face-to-face services, informed the extension of the time that the temple will be open for services, and informed that services were held online (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020i). The following day, March 21, he mentioned the recognition, by the judicial authorities, of the therapeutic importance of the church. He praised the Public Ministry, and offered Doria and the army the space to build a Field Hospital in São Paulo (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020j).

Silas Malafaia's video of March 23, 2020 addressed the new coronavirus, Bolsonaro's measures, and criticized China. Malafaia started giving out data that he claimed to be "proven data" on the mortality of those infected, without an indication of the source, accompanied by the accusation that the press hid such data. He claimed that among the 15,000 killed by COVID-19 so far, no one died between 0 and 9 years old; between 10 and 39 years, mortality is 0.2%; between 40 and 49 years, mortality is 0.4%; from 50 to 59, mortality is 1.3%; from 60 to 69 years, mortality is 13.6%; from 70 to 79, mortality is 8%; and over 80 years, mortality is 14.8%. He also claimed that no one without comorbidities died from COVID-19 (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020k). Malafaia then said that the latest plagues in the world came from China, that they withheld information about the disease and doubts the control of the disease, saying that he never believed in communists. He did not reveal, however, that the data he used comes from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CCDC), reported in Brazil by *Jornal Extra* on March 8 (Tatsch and Garcia 2020), and by *Revista Exame* on March 16 (Calil 2020).

Malafaia also cited a tweet from Donald Trump, who claimed that the cure could not be greater than the disease, and that he would return to economic activities in 15 days (Trump 2020), and claimed to have 300 employees, mentioning the financial difficulties that protective measures would bring. He also criticized conducting opinion polls about the president's popularity in a pandemic, criticized the press, which only showed chaos and produced panic. Finally, he claimed that the church is not open because of tithes and offerings, but to help people, and that it would not close the place of worship by order of governors or mayors, justifying that the church has a therapeutic function. On the same day, March 23, he criticized the governors and mayors, and against the decrees issued by them to close the churches. He claims that the adjustment determined that no services be held, but that churches cannot be closed (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020l).

On the 24th, in parallel to President Bolsonaro's criticisms of the governor of São Paulo, his political opponent, and the press, Malafaia changed his speech and began to criticize the governors. He criticized João Dória, governor of São Paulo, and accused the newspaper *El País* of disseminating fake News (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020m). The next day, he stated from data from the Italian government (without him indicating the source for consultation) that only 5 men under 50 died, and that under 30, no man would have died. He also cited the Israeli government's move, in the person of the Minister of Defense, to isolate the elderly and release everything. He also quoted, without indicating the sources, that 8 million people die of hunger a year, and 125,000 die of tuberculosis every month in the world. He cited the intention of the President of the USA, Donald Trump, to free the economy and distribute one thousand dollars per person, and indicated the possibility of social chaos, which is facing the Sofia Choice, and that reopening the economy is less serious than the eventual deaths by COVID-19 (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020n).

On March 26, Malafaia called Doria a hypocrite and demagogue for releasing work at the factories in São Paulo, which represented the pastor's alignment with the president's criticisms of his political rivals. Malafaia also endorsed the president's speech that Brazil is facing a choice between Sofia, between jobs and health, and relativized the gravity of COVID-19 citing without source that 650,000 people worldwide die of flu annually, and recommends protection of the elderly (Silas Malafaia Oficial o). On the same day, he comments on Decree n° 10,292, of March 26, 2020,

which expands the essential activities that must be maintained, which were provided for in Decree n° 10,282, of March 20, 2020, which regulated Lei n° 13,979, of February 6, 2020, on public services and essential activities. Bolsonaro defined churches and Lottery Agencies as essential activities, and Malafaia sought to demonstrate that this would not mean the release of services (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020p).

On March 31, 2020, Malafaia used a speech by the Director-General of the Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, to argue that the leadership of the World Health Organization agrees with Bolsonaro. Malafaia called the WHO Director-General communist, criticized the press, and showed a video of a community located in an uninformed place, with open trade, and then arguing that if COVID-19 were such a violent disease, it would happen a catastrophe. Malafaia also intensified criticism of governors and mayors, saying that they promote a “half-bowl quarantine.” Finally, he announced that after the COVID-19 pandemic, Brazil would enjoy a prosperity never seen before in the country’s history (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020q). Malafaia returned to the subject on April 3, distorting the speech of the Director-General of the World Health Organization, denouncing the lack of sanitation and minimizing the pandemic with the same argument and conclusion: the disease is not so serious. He also inserted the concept of “herd immunity,” in which 70% of the population, being infected, will protect the others (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020r).

On April 2, Malafaia passed guidelines for meeting the call for a fast in favor of Brazil, called by the president of the republic, and indicated that after the health crisis, Brazil would live in prosperity, surprising the world (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020s). On April 4, when criticizing the police of Santa Catarina, which interrupted a service at the home of a person with 5 people, and the governor of the state of Santa Catarina, who issued the decree against agglomerations, Malafaia said that the answer will be given in the next elections. He also claimed the constitutional principle of inviolability of the home, and indicated, without citing a source, that around 13,000 people would not die from COVID-19 or asthma in Brazil per year (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020t).

On April 8, in parallel to Bolsonaro’s criticisms of the governors, Malafaia criticized the governor of São Paulo, João Doria, and the governor of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel. He criticized the lack of quarantine at Carnival, spoke again about the lack of sanitation, showed agglomerations in public transport, in banks, and attributed this to political interests and the opportunity to act without the limits of the bidding law. Malafaia also showed video footage of Bolsonaro calling for a return to normality. And he said: “Governors, politicians, the press will be ashamed, because all the catastrophic predictions of coronavirus in Brazil will not be realized and I am declaring this here in the name of Jesus” (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020u). The rhetorical advance of Pastor Silas Malafaia led him to reach 1 million subscribers.

On April 11, Silas Malafaia again criticized the governors, especially against Bolsonaro’s political rivals, the governor of São Paulo, João Doria, and the governor of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel. The criticism turned against the monitoring of geolocation to verify the index of social isolation. The withdrawal of people on the beach was also criticized. He again showed bank lines, agglomerations in public transport, accused the press of spreading terror, mentioned problems with tenders, and denounced an attempt to overthrow President Bolsonaro. Once again, he said that COVID-19 would not be calamitous, being analogous to the flu, and announced days of prosperity for Brazil after the pandemic (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020v).

The constant references to sanitation are clarified when Malafaia advertises a company providing the service, which he mentions being able to serve the homes, companies, and public authorities. In the case of the company's advertising, China, constantly referred to as a negative example, becomes a positive reference (Silas Malafaia Oficial 2020x). It is also possible to observe the modulation of respectful speech when referring to mayors, governors, and the World Health Organization, from the beginning of the approaches, to the vehement criticism of them. Another fact to be highlighted is the comparison between the number of deaths in the middle of an epidemic as a strategy to minimize it. These argumentative inconsistencies, coupled with inflamed and even aggressive rhetoric, evidence the use of informational disorder and disinformation as argumentative strategies (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017).

Malafaia uses informational disorder to, through satires, parodies, exalted performances, and indignant speech, intersect with credible messages with deceptive content to highlight or disqualify a certain framework or argument. He does so when he relates the new coronavirus to China, indicating the need to subscribe to xenophobia as a bridge to the denial of the disease, in alignment with Trumpism.

Another resource used by Malafaia is the false connections between headlines, photos, and elements that do not correspond to what the content says. He uses images devoid of context, showing partial clippings to illustrate the broader reality, as when he showed images of agglomeration without mentioning the high adherence to social isolation prevailing until then, as shown by In Loco's Social Isolation Index. In short, Malafaia, by illustrating his opposition to social isolation with videos, and not with the available data, cooperated with the erosion of isolation rates, as can be seen in the month of May, after his critical interventions.

Another resource used by Malafaia is adherence to false contexts, in which the true content is mixed with the false. In citing COVID-19 data in Italy, he made use of a partial study, which proved to be not only questionable, but riddled with false premises, especially due to underreporting (Natale et al. 2020). Similar to this is Malafaia's use of impostor content, in which genuine sources, generally omitted by Malafaia, are used to 'legitimize' fraudulent information. The discourse that other diseases, such as tuberculosis, or the flu, kill more than COVID-19, while cases of contagion of the new coronavirus increase, is a clear example of trying to legitimize the fraudulent information that the disease is not so serious. The same happens when empirically citing agglomerations in public transport, banks, and supermarkets, and inferring that the momentary absence of an increase in cases would represent an indication that the disease is not serious. Another loquacious example is the criticism of the governors, in which their speeches are related to hidden and underlying intentions of corruption and coup against the Bolsonaro government.

Such content manipulation, in which genuine content is manipulated to deceive or confuse, is more subtle than manufactured content, in which the entire content is false, created intentionally to deceive and harm (Wardle 2017). For this reason, the motivation for sharing misinformation increases, since they are often self-referenced as the revelation of what the press hides, and as a content whose motivation is morally superior, sacred (since it is part of a religious discourse) and enhanced by violent rhetoric.

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) still demonstrate that there are four categories of motivational factors to produce speeches analogous to that of Pastor Silas Malafaia:

financial, political, social, and psychological. It is possible to map the four in Malafaia's speech.

Such speeches are financial, because they discuss topics that, once resolved, will provide profit, such as the possibility of keeping churches open and profit more from tithes, or benefit from the disorder of information through the advertising of a sanitation company. China, marked with the negative label of "communist," becomes a reference in the fight against the coronavirus when the interest is to promote the sanitation service.

Malafaia's speeches are clearly political, reflecting the desire for alignment with Bolsonaro and the adoption of the president's criticisms of his political opponents: governors, mayors, the World Health Organization. In the case of the latter, Malafaia's speeches move from praise to criticism, in alignment with Bolsonaro's moods with his Director-General. Malafaia even mentions the upcoming elections as the context of response to the governor of Santa Catarina, which indicates the awareness of his political power as a relevant actor in the construction of public opinion.

Malafaia's performance is also social, as it causes priority evangelical engagement in favor of Bolsonaro, against the group's interests in the health field. The reinforcement that allows the adoption of a speech that, if followed, will put people at risk, is religion, and the manipulation of faith. The promises of a prosperous future for Brazil and that the COVID-19 pandemic would not advance failed over time, but they served to provoke the actions of the faithful against social isolation and against the government's own public health policies, against which Bolsonaro also opposed. Malafaia's performance also causes psychological engagement for this reason, and prestige is evidenced by the exponential increase in subscribers on the Silas Malafaia Oficial channel, due to the pastor's performance in the pandemic.

Silas Malafaia's adherence to Bolsonaroism accompanied Bolsonaro's tensions and oppositions against his opponents. Malafaia endorsed the charge against China, adopted alignment with Trump's policies; used the data without sources; advocated vertical isolation; he constantly criticized the press, governors, and mayors; made calls for demonstrations; motivated religious belief in the success of the Bolsonaro government. Malafaia became the character that ideologically directed much of the evangelical support to Bolsonaroism, giving messianic and negationist textures to the link of Brazilian evangelicals to the president.

Easter of the Messiah Bolsonaro: a Religious Way to Ignore a Pandemic

The culmination of evangelical denialism took place on Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020, when Bolsonaro participated in a video conference with religious leaders. In this celebration, Bolsonaro began by stating that the COVID-19 virus was starting to go away, despite the record number of cases—22,169—adding up to 1223 deaths by COVID-19 on the same day (Tvbrasilgov 2020e). In the whole event, there was no moment dedicated to any homage to the dead, or to consoling the mourners. Iris Abravanel, wife of Silvio Santos, owner of a television channel (SBT), directed the meeting. She appealed to us to feel gratitude for what is happening, and that Brazil is a blessed country, and started to mediate the participation of each religious leader.

The first to speak was Bishop Eduardo Bravo, of the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, mentioned peace, not to mention the health crisis. Then Pastor Josué Valandro

Jr., from the Batista Atitude Church of Rio de Janeiro, a church of which Jair Bolsonaro's wife, Michele Bolsonaro, is a member, spoke of the power of the resurrection in Jesus, but did not mention the deaths in the health crisis. Catholic bishop Dom Fernando Antônio Figueiredo, emeritus of the diocese of Santo Amaro, gave the blessing of São Francisco de Assis, but did not mention anything about the pandemic.

The first to mention COVID-19 was Rabbi Leib Rojtenberg. He congratulated Bolsonaro and SECOM secretary Fábio Weingartner, a member of the same synagogue as Roitenberg. He recognized the seriousness of the illness and spoke about Passover in Judaism. Who spoke next, the apostle Estevam Hernandes, of the Renascer em Cristo Church, returned to the triumphal tone: he announced a good future and a new time beyond the difficult time. His wife, Bishop Sônia Hernandes praised God because Brazil has a president and a first lady who fear God. Pastor Luiz Hermínio, of the Missões Evangelísticas Vinde Amados Meus Church, spoke next, and said that God was “baptizing our nation with fear,” suggesting that COVID-19 was a divine instrument to provoke submission.

The COVID-19 theme returned in the speech of Father Reginaldo Manzotti, who said it was the quarantine to face the pandemic as a profound Lent. He argued that the Easter charity covers a multitude of sins, asked families to strive to live in solidarity and sang a song. Then, Pastor Silas Malafaia, of the Assembleia de Deus Vitória em Cristo Church, returned to his triumphal tone, declaring that in a short time Brazil will enjoy a time of prosperity never seen before, and that the prophets of chaos, who brought the spirit of fear, would be ashamed—adding that in Brazil 28,000 people die each year from contaminated water, and thousands of cancer, but no one says anything. He ended up criticizing the press.

Bishop Abner Ferreira, president of the Assembleias de Deus do Ministério Madureira Churches, spoke next. He declared a blessing for all Brazilian families, and repeated Bolsonaro's campaign slogan: “Brazil above all, God above everyone.” He claimed that chaos prophets would fall to the ground because COVID-19 numbers were falling. Pastor Samuel Câmara, leader of the Assembleia de Deus de Belém do Pará Church, then expressed his wish that COVID-19 be won and that the economy be saved. Pastor Teófilo Hayashi of Zion Church announced God's great faithfulness and blessed the president. None of the three made any mention of the severity of the pandemic, or the need for social isolation, or even addressed the mourners.

Pastor Marco Feliciano, from the Catedral do Avivamento Church, accused the press, praised the chloroquine, declared that evil is falling, said that the president fears God and that the day of laughter would soon come after the difficulties. Then the missionary RR Soares, of the Internacional da Graça de Deus Church, said that the revolt against the president was an action of the devil, and that the devil, desperate, uses all means to deceive people, but that Brazil will prosper—no words of comfort were said to the mourners, and the new coronavirus was classified by him as the devil's power and principality.

The word was given to Bishop JB Carvalho, of the Comunidade das Nações Church, who stressed that Easter was the occasion when death was swallowed up by victory, and announced that God sent a leader to lead the Brazilian people to freedom. He declared judgment against those who prevent God from doing what he wants to do. Then Bishop Robson Rodovalho, of the Comunidade Evangélica Sara Nossa Terra, declared his confidence in President Bolsonaro's management and authority, and alluded to Bolsonaro's victory against the stab.

Pastor René Terra Nova, from the Ministério Internacional da Restauração Church, was the last pastor to speak. He called Bolsonaro a liberator like Moses, said he came to liberate the Brazilian people, and declared that the nation would live what it never lived because it is doing what it never did. He also indicated that Bolsonaro's bond with God will guarantee prosperity for the country.

At the end of the meeting, Bolsonaro took the floor. He was thrilled to mention the stab he took when he suffered an attack on September 6, 2018, and said his survival was a miracle. He indicated that his election was also a miracle. He also pointed out that the Bible text of John 8.32—"and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free"—led him to victory. He indicated that in the slogan of his election, "Brazil above all, God above everyone," the first part has a military origin, but the second part appeared within him when speaking to 20 thousand evangelicals. He indicated the values he defends: defense of the family; the need to ask for indoctrination in schools; the wear and tear of institutions, the preaching of the division of race, color, and sex. He claimed that more important than life is freedom, and that Brazil without a change of course would become Venezuela. He even criticized the media.

On the same day, bolsonaristas gathered on Av. Paulista with yellow-green clothes and flags. In one of the actions in the context of the demonstration, participants carried a coffin, mocking the deaths from coronavirus and the need for quarantine. They also called for the impeachment of the governor of São Paulo, João Doria. On Easter Sunday, the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus by evangelical Bolsonaroists became, in summary, a celebration of the pandemic's denial, a declaration of Bolsonaro's messianity, an indication that the future with Bolsonaro will be full, an occasion to criticize the press and a religious rite disincarnated from the daily death of COVID-19.

Bolsonaro and Evangelicals: by Way of Conclusion

The belief of many evangelicals that Brazil will improve through the suppression of freedom and human rights was reinforced with the advent of COVID-19 to face death by illness in the name of maintaining freedom against communism. This is nothing but inveiglement.

A fundamental reference for understanding the intimate connection between religion and economics, and the contempt of religious for the effects of COVID-19, which unfolds in negationism, is the work of Franz Hinkelammert, a German author who has lived and worked for a long time in Latin America. Hinkelammert has produced a solid reflection on the links between theology and economics in the last 20 years (Hinkelammert 1983; Hinkelammert 1995; Hinkelammert 2013). We will mention only three conclusions from the author.

- 1 The first, he calls it "ideological weapons of death." Hinkelammert criticizes, from a Marxist perspective, the fetishization that occurs in neoliberal capitalism, which makes the market a new form of idolatry.
- 2 Second, Hinkelammert shows how capitalism works with the notion of sacrifice. For him, theological reflection that serves as the basis for the idea of economic growth requires the sacrifice of the poor, perpetuating social injustice through economic inequality.

- 3 The third idea concerns the myth of capitalism. The author argues that religious capitalism creates a “simple rational logic” based on an illogical assumption that the economic system that destroys the dignity of most human beings is the best system. The “logic” of capitalism is a “rationalization of the irrational,” which places the economic system above people, concealing the benefits for those who own the capital, and minimizing the losses for those who lack dignity.

The ideas of adopting “ideological weapons of death,” “sacrifice” and “simple rational logic” materialized in the Brazilian health crisis in 2020. The labels promoting “work dignity,” “honesty,” and the attempt to follow the stereotype of “good citizen,” united Bolsonaro and the evangelicals, both submitted to the logic of capitalism. For this reason, a moral code was adopted in this government that favored adaptation to the profit logic over health and even economic well-being. This substitution belongs to the belief system demanded by the “religious presidency of Bolsonaro.” He made himself a “mythical” figure, who needs religion or religious adherence to thrive.

With the advent of COVID-19, the required sacrifice of human lives in favor of economic health explained the existence of a tension between the market and human rights (Hinkelammert 2016). If Christians proved to be able to repudiate the discourse of human rights and protection of individuals in the face of a draconian state, the Bolsonaro government, in alliance with a large portion of evangelicals, went to the last consequences in banning fundamental rights in the name of the interests of the market.

The false dichotomies believed and endorsed even more radically in the biggest health crisis in recent history in Brazil have become a plant of unjustified and harmful oppositions to the population. The false dilemma between health and jobs has sent citizens with constitutional rights to dignity to choose: security versus human rights; jobs versus human rights; economic development versus human rights. For this logic to thrive in the absence of media conglomerates’ adherence to scientific negativism, it was necessary to criticize the traditional press, radiate and spread the radical ideas through social networks, and, fundamentally, to promote religious adherence to these “beliefs.”

Evangelical religion became a fundamental part of this Bolsonar crusade: by co-opting evangelicals to weaken values related to human rights in the midst of a pandemic, Bolsonaro managed to give some credibility to the operation of indignity, as it provoked an appearance of moral validity of the immoral principle of destitution of fundamental rights, especially the right to life in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

What is seen today in the pandemic of COVID-19 already existed in the capitalism in force in Brazil, which was and continues to serve the absolute submission of everything to the logic of exploitation and profit through a discourse that suppresses labor, humanitarian, citizen conquests. In both contexts, from the day to day of liberalism and COVID-19, freedom, dignity, and democracy become vassals of the interests of the powerful. And it is religion that produces adhesion and adherence, useful tools for harmful subversion.

Bolsonaro therefore found a way to seduce Protestants. Even before he was elected, he created a strategy for using the evangelical faith that clearly went through the selection of aspects of public morality that were, in the evangelical imagination, taboos, themes of strong appeal to evangelicals. Some of these themes are: combating the sexualization of children; sexualization, in the context of culture; and stimulating the

experience of homoaffective relationships. The fear that operated on pre-existing prejudice was and is an engine that set in motion engagement and strengthened group identity. There is rarely anything so effective in generating compromise than the lie that is linked to belief and is potentiated in the crucible of religious faith.

And that is why most evangelicals support Bolsonaro, lending his prestige and number to the reconstruction of public morality, on the basis of superficial speeches in defense of the family. On the other hand, evangelicals underlined the defense of the rights to food, work, health, education. It all came down to protecting babies, children, teenagers, and young people from illusory, unreal, liar dangers, but cited by Bolsonaro and believed by most evangelicals: sexual stimulation of babies, bottle with a penis in place of the beak, textbook with sex for 6-year-olds, HPV vaccine for pre-teens to stimulate sexual initiation. The accusations made by Bolsonaro and believed by evangelicals need not correspond to the truth: it is enough that such themes fit the Brazilian evangelical understanding of evil—an evil that, in a hidden and satanic way, seeks to pervert believers.

Bolsonaro and his evangelical supporters treated the worst epidemic in Republican Brazil with disdain. And for that reason, even with the lies and with, at this point (mid-July 2020), more than 70,000 deceased, Bolsonaro and the evangelicals remain allied with each other and with death, with little evidence that there will be a divorce between them.

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