



Editorial

Dossier – Politics, Media and Religion

The Flower and the Nausea

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As I write this text, the world awaits the results of the U.S. presidential election – one of several elections in recent history in which religious elements have been in evidence – where we can see the support to Trump of sectors of white and conservative Evangelicals, counting on mediatic pastors. In Brazil, one of the bases of support of the current presidency brings together Catholics and Evangelicals with a conservative orientation, which are distributed among voters and politicians elected to the National Congress – among them are Evangelical clerics and lay Catholics, with high mobilization in traditional and digital media. What do these and other scenarios tell us about the relationships between religion, media, and politics?

At first glance, when we refer to religion in this context, some groups stand out – conservative Christians, or fundamentalists, if we use a more precise conceptualization. And when we refer to politics, we associate it with party politics. We can think the media of as both the media employed by these groups to reach and gain support and how diverse media – most notably the mainstream press – cover these events and these personalities. Undoubtedly, this is a relationship that has been established in our country more frequently in the last decade, but I propose to think about other relationships.

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When we approach the religious issue, we know how diverse our country is – even if we have a majority of Christians, there are many varieties of them, Protestant, Pentecostal, and Catholic Christianity – and let us not leave out a portion of the Spiritists who consider themselves Christians. We have many other religions - those of African origin, Eastern religions, besides Islam, Judaism. We have a growing number of religiously unaffiliated who still believe in God or gods, besides the increase of “out of church” Evangelicals, a recent phenomenon that shows the presence of Evangelicals who give up living with a denomination but do not leave out themselves as Evangelicals.

A religious orientation does not necessarily define political, partisan choices or otherwise. Politics does not mean exclusively party associations or its actions - to associate politics only with the party is a symptom of the emptying of the meaning of what is political in our contemporary period. In Brazil, political parties are viewed with suspicion by most of the population, due to news of corruption and privileges that bring the feeling that no matter how much one vote, nothing changes. This impression has been counterbalanced by a new generation of activists, who do not necessarily get involved with parties but mobilize causes through this new tool: the digital media.

The digital media have caused optimism about twenty years ago: the Internet would bring the possibility of democratization of knowledge; connecting people from various parts of the world, allowing “ordinary” people to produce and disseminate diverse content (arts, music, science, political reflections) to an audience previously unimaginable. This vision of communication from all to everyone has been proved fragile over time – not all people in the world would have access (as they still do not) to the internet which requires expensive equipment and resources for maintenance that are not within everyone’s reach. The software also belongs to private companies – even with the existence of open software, the specialized knowledge to use it is lacking. The Internet is a big business, which has joined other powerful media.

In the past few years, documentaries such as “Fake America Great Again” (Thomas Huchon, 2018) and “The Social Dilemma” (Jeff Orlowski, 2020) show the power of digital media, which sneak up on users’ daily lives, recording their steps, their tastes, their religious beliefs, their consumer preferences - and their political ideas. And political influencers could use all of this to target specific campaigns, promote agendas, people, solutions – and demonize as many other agendas, people, and solutions.

It is important to be remembered that the media in our country helped to form opinions about politics, politicians, religion, and religious believers a long time ago, before the Internet. Communication in Brazil has always been in the hands of few business owners and commercial groups, who often allied themselves with the political and religious agendas of their times. Through this “mainstream media,” Catholicism and the Catholic Church maintained their social and cultural legitimacy, to the detriment of other religious expressions such as Islam, Afro-Brazilian religions, and Evangelical groups. Only with the acquisition of Rede Record [Record Network] by Edir Macedo (The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God) in 1989, this situation changed, with the more robust entry of a non-catholic religious actor into the media in Brazil, and setting in motion a power project that we see today more outlined. The power project of a group like the one of The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God does not embrace the whole Evangelical group. Those who have greater projection by the media tend to have greater visibility for a public opinion concerning those who are not in the media or do not have them.

So far, Catholics and Evangelicals have used the printed and radio media to evangelize, educate and unite their believers. The verb “to use” the media carries a meaning that is currently questioned by communication studies – because it refers to the functionalist logic, in which the subjects “use” a media to spread information – and in a certain way, they did it. I am grateful to my dear colleague Magali do Nascimento Cunha for showing me this – the media’s relationship with the subjects is more complex – communication can transform both the “sender” and the “receiver”. English Cultural Studies already pointed to

this in the 1960s – even if there is no two-way egalitarian, there is no passive receiver, nor an omnipotent sender. Michel de Certeau, in his “The Practice of Everyday Life,” reinforced this image that subjects, even without political, economic, or social power, can do things in their way – they can launch “tactics” to move in the territory of those who hold power in everyday life.

In this manner, the media can be seen as an entity that, when incorporated by religious agents and institutions, inserts the religious in a sphere that does not obey only its precepts – merges with the market, with the politics, with the activism, and also takes its contributions to all these instances, in the public and private spheres. So let’s return to the question of politics – what kind of politics do we talk about when we think about the relationship between media and religion? We are talking about partisan politics, yes, but also about the political identity, the struggle for civil rights of marginalized groups (women, blacks, indigenous peoples, LGBTQI+), the situation and the opposition, neighborhood associations. It does not always appear in the mainstream media, but it has used digital media to mobilize itself – in recent years, this mobilization has attracted opposition from conservative Catholic and Evangelical sectors, which capitalize on a morality and behavior agenda in their digital media to spread fake news and moral panic. Although “fake news” is a typical product of the popularization of digital media, I remember the historian Marc Bloch, who as early as 1944, the medievalist that he was, said that rumors, gossips and lies were spread at various times in human history because they echoed beliefs already established among societies. This makes us think of the beliefs that validate the adherence of today’s fake news, or the rumors of the past, and how to dialogue with fresh ideas, diverse people could help to get individuals out of their bubbles...

There are religious who are not conservatives or fundamentalists, and have engaged in digital spaces to take their political vision from their religious values, such as the FALE Network (<https://www.facebook.com/redefale/>), and have provided services in the clarification of what is or is not fake news, such as the Bereia Collective (<https://coletivobereia.com.br/>). Far before these

initiatives, it is interesting to remember that the Basic Ecclesial Communities, since the 1960s, have sought to apply Liberation Theology to eradicate the social sin of poverty and hunger; the Protestant Social Gospel has also mobilized actions for social justice and ecumenism. And it was an Archbishop, Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns, and a Presbyterian Reverend, Jaime Wright, who organized a task force to denounce the prisons and tortures of the civil-military dictatorship, which resulted in the book “Brazil: Nunca mais” (Brazil: never again) (1986). The ecumenical cult in Sé Cathedral (SP) to the memory of Vladimir Herzog, who died in Doi-Codi in 1975, gathering religious leaders from different sides was a political, religious and media event, and was one of the strongest examples of resistance to the dictatorship in full years of lead. Also, Afro-Brazilian religious who have stood up against the vandalism of their land and against the hate speech that unfortunately still attacks their symbols and their practitioners – not a few bring in their digital networks guidelines for their members to strengthen the defense and reaction against this violence.

I am writing all this so that readers keep in mind that when we relate religion, media, and politics there is a myriad of themes and characters to be considered, besides those that seem to have taken a leading role in Brazilian reality. To understand how these groups gained support and visibility, and not the spiritual heirs of Arns (D. Paulo, D. Zilda), Wright (Jaime and Paulo), Henri Sobel, among so many who fought for the valorization of humanity, solidarity, and fraternity – this is one challenge of reflection.

Let me end with an optimistic tone, despite so many sorrows and desolations that we have been through, pre-pandemic and while the pandemic persists. I want to end with the hope of Carlos Drummond de Andrade and his “The Flower and the Nausea” poem:

*Imprisoned by my class and my clothes
I go in white through the gray street
melancholy men, shopkeepers peer at me.
Should I continue until I sicken?*

*[...] A flower rose from the street!
Far away they pass by, trams, buses, rivers of steel traffic
A flower, though faded
Evades the police, breaks the asphalt
Be completely silent, stop your business
I assure you that a flower rose.*

*(...) It is ugly. But it is a flower. It pierced the asphalt, the
boredom, the disgust and the hate.
(ANDRADE, 2012, p. 13).*

May our reflections and actions make more flowers rose on the street.
May we also see the flowers on the street.

Reference

ANDRADE, Carlos Drumond. A flor e a náusea. *In*: ANDRADE, C. D. **A rosa do povo**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2012.