


Political theology and Sars-Cov-2 pandemic: issues to Collective Health

Teologia-política e pandemia Sars-Cov-2/Covid-19: questões à Saúde Coletiva

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Abstract

This theoretical essay presents an overview of the field of political theology as an important part of political philosophy, demonstrates its relevance in the current Brazilian social and political scenario, and problematizes its intersections to the Collective Health field. In the first part, we explore the theological-political thoughts from key thinkers of this area, such as Saint Augustine, Giorgio Agamben, Karl Marx, Enrique Dussel, and Boaventura de Souza Santos. In the light of these authors, in the second part of this article, we describe the emergence of political-theologies in the Brazilian political scenario and sociocultural dynamics, manifested among evangelical groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic situation shed light on many contradictions of Brazilian society and evidenced controversies between two lines of divergent evangelical political theologies: the conservative/antidemocratic and the progressive ones. The re-emergence of these political theologies holds relevant effects regarding the responses of social groups and actions of power in the face of public health problems, which deserve greater attention of the Collective Health field. They influence the spheres of power and sociocultural dynamics in terms of health-disease-care, contributing with collective protection measures and/or encouraging risky, negligent and denialist postures. We conclude by problematizing epistemological contributions to a renewed production of knowledge-action regarding the interface between political theology and Collective Health.

Keywords: Political Theology; Philosophy, Collective Health; Pandemic.

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Resumo

Este ensaio teórico apresenta, em linhas gerais, o campo da teologia-política enquanto importante área da filosofia política, demonstra sua relevância no atual cenário sociopolítico brasileiro e problematiza suas possíveis intersecções com o campo da Saúde Coletiva. Na primeira parte, busca-se explorar o pensamento teológico-político de autores centrais dessa área, como Santo Agostinho, Giorgio Agamben, Karl Marx, Enrique Dussel e Boaventura de Souza Santos. À luz desses autores, na segunda parte do artigo, descreve-se a emergência de teologias-políticas no cenário político e na dinâmica sociocultural brasileira, manifestas entre grupos evangélicos durante a pandemia de covid-19. Esse cenário da pandemia revelou muitas contradições da sociedade brasileira e evidenciou controvérsias entre duas linhagens de teologias-políticas evangélicas divergentes: as conservadoras/antidemocráticas e as progressistas. A reemergência dessas teologias políticas tem efeitos relevantes no que tange às respostas de grupos sociais e ações do poder frente aos problemas de saúde pública, que merecem maior atenção do campo da Saúde Coletiva. Elas influenciam as esferas do poder e a dinâmica sociocultural no que se relaciona à saúde-doença-cuidado, contribuindo com medidas de proteção coletiva e/ou estimulando posturas de risco, negligências e negacionismos. Conclui-se problematizando contribuições epistemológicas para uma renovada produção do conhecimento-ação na interface da teologia política com a Saúde Coletiva. **Palavras-chave:** Teologia Política; Filosofia; Saúde Coletiva; Pandemia.

Introduction

The film of the same name to the novel written by the Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot, “*La religieuse*”, closes with the scene of a young woman, who was forced to live a religious life, escaping from the convent and taking the road, free from the control of religion (*La Religieuse*, 1966). This scene captures the meaning of the Enlightenment scenario, which symbolized, among other things, humanity’s attempt to rid itself of religious dominion.

The eighteenth century Enlightenment and the revolutions on the European continent operated ruptures between Church and State, as well as the processes of secularization and laicization, but were not able to prevent the reappearance of theological and theocratic ideas in the public-state space of the twentieth and twenty-first century. The achievements of the Enlightenment proved to be limited, because the separation between the power of the Church and the modern State, and the secularization of society proved to be unfinished and contradictory processes (Santos, 2014). It seems clear that the forms of exercising power and of governing modern states keep anchoring themselves and functioning on theological-political grounds (Agamben, 2011).

At the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Jürgen Habermas (2006) detected, in his article Religion in the public sphere, the resurgence of religion in the Western public scene and its connection with the State and modern democracies. Different authors (Balibar; Wallerstein, 2021; Zizek; Gunjevic, 2015) recognize that religion and political theologies are powerful forces in contemporary political and social conflicts.

More recently, for example, in countries such as India, Russia, Turkey, the USA, Poland, Croatia, and Serbia an important link has been observed between the emergence of religious movements, new political right-wings, racism, and nationalisms with their authoritarian forms of domination (Balibar; Wallerstein, 2021).

In the realm of Christianity, the expansion of fundamentalist religious movements around the world holds an important political impact

(Santos, 2014) and this trend is also perceived in Brazil. The country is going through a socio-political moment in which the Christian religion appears vividly in the socio-political dimension, evidencing its potential to define political-electoral directions and influence national socio-cultural dynamics, especially with the emergence of evangelical groups.

This theme deserves attention from the Collective Health (CH) field, due to religion being a striking feature of the cultures of urban and rural populations in Brazil and having an influence on the molds of interpretations about illnesses, causalities, forms of treatment, curing practices, and adherence/participation in health policies. Political-theological assumptions guide government actions also in the field of health policies, in addition to influencing sociocultural aspects and ways of organizing responses to health situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

This essay aims to present, in general lines, the field of political theology, describing this area of philosophy from the thought of some of its important authors, such as Augustine, Agamben, Marx, Dussel, and Boaventura Santos. Then, taking as an example some expressions of the political theologies manifested among evangelical groups in the Brazilian socio-political scenario during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the year 2020, it concludes with the problematization of possible intersections between the political theology and the field of Collective Health.

On political theology

These categories, theology and politics, by themselves, constitute distinct fields of knowledge with particular objects. Their combination highlights the challenge of attempting any precise conceptual delimitation. It is no coincidence that Roberto Esposito (2019), in his work *Dois. A máquina da teologia política e o lugar do pensamento*, affirms the impenetrability of the concept and the impossibility of a univocal definition, because we find ourselves

exactly within it, using its vocabularies for at least two millennia¹.

The very categories used to explain political theology, such as secularization, disenchantment, and desecration, are insufficient to define the concept, because they operate precisely on theological-political foundations. Political Theology, therefore, would not necessarily be a concept, but a “machination,” which, like the device in Foucault, conditions the humans’ behavior so that its meaning escapes them, subjugating their existence and, at the same time, operating an exclusionary inclusion of one pole (theology) over the other (politics), uniting as they separate, and distancing as they unite. (Esposito, 2019).

The rotation between these two poles runs through the history of classical and modern philosophical ideas, bringing together countless thinkers, such as Augustine, Agamben, Spinoza, Hegel, Schmidt, Marx, Deleuze, and so many others. We refer to political theology, this field of controversies, as an area of philosophy, whose reconstruction of nuances, central characters, arguments, and internal disputes goes far beyond this article’s scope and was already addressed by Esposito (2019), Agamben (2011), among others.

Political theology, briefly, refers to the correlations between modern juridical-political concepts and theological presuppositions that explain the political origin of modernity. This field considers theology as an important instance of determining political position, as well as the performance of social groups in the religious justification of political action (Sá, 2018).

It should be noted that this area was strongly ignited in Europe during the twentieth century, with the work of Carl Schmitt (2005) “Political Theology,” but, historically, the first great work of Western political theology was “*Da civitate Dei*” by St. Augustine (2000), which continues to exert influence on modern thought. For Augustine, political activity would be eminently evil because it constitutes a war

1 Two specific examples: the word “corruption,” much used in the Brazilian socio-political scenario, which origin dates back to Augustinian theology in its sense of the sinful human condition, bearer of a broken (*ruptus*) heart (*cor*) and, more recently, the term “fundamentalism,” which was born in the Christian religious milieu of the United States and is now widely used in the political public sphere of different Western countries (Santos, 2014).

for power and always involves conflicts, murders, and violence. Perhaps this is explained by the context of the work (years 413-427 AD), written in the face of the invasion and sack of Rome by the Visigothic king Alaric.

The Augustinian text attempts to make a historical overview from the creation of the world to the fifth century, to demonstrate a becoming constituted by the stages of Creation, original sin, the covenant of God with the Jewish people, the sacrifice of the Messiah and the foundation of the Church. It shows a conception of linear time that will influence many philosophies of history over the centuries.

The city of God is not necessarily the Church as an institution, physical space, or even an urban center, but the community of believers. The city of men, in turn, is an earthly plane born of Cain and is related to the rupture between God and Humanity. Since then, humanity would have intended to replace God, as incarnate, for example, in the Roman Empire. Thus, both the State and the Church would become irreconcilable since they represent distinct elements metaphysically—one belongs to the city of men and the other to the city of God. There is a split, as they are different kingdoms. One seeks the expansion of power and the other salvation in Christ; the first wants to deify political power and the second is based on the love of God. Despite their differences, they have in common the goal of embodying the universal historical process. In this process, the earthly city tries to appropriate the “sacred” by its idolatrous cults, but the Church should be autonomous and free (Augustine, 2000; Esposito, 2019).

This Augustinian notion seems to be reflected in “Pilate and Jesus,” by the Italian Giorgio Agamben, in which the philosopher presents this same duality between two kingdoms, taking as an example the dialogue narrated in the gospels between the proposal of God’s kingdom of Jesus and the Roman Empire of Pilate (Agamben, 2014). In fact, in Agamben’s own notion of *Homo Sacer*—in the concept of naked life—this question emerges in an innovative way, since it is an indistinct figure, born of Roman law and constituted in a zone of intersection of sacredness and profanity (Agamben, 2007). The inclusive-distinction that Agamben makes about

sacred-profane in *Homo Sacer*, which continues to exist in modern States, shows that the paradigm of secularization would not explain politics and power in modernity, but desecration—a phenomenon directly linked to the notion of the sacred.

The most prominent point is that, in Agamben, a critique of Economic Theology reveals the symmetries between religious rituals and the rituals of modern sovereign power. This sovereign power, which engenders naked lives, finds its genesis in theo-political foundations. In the second volume of his tetralogy of *Homo Sacer*, “*O reino e a glória: uma genealogia teológica da economia e do governo*” [The kingdom and the glory: for a theological genealogy of economy and government], the philosopher demonstrates the theological foundations of the Modern State by affirming how much the governmental machine originates from Christian theology of ancient times and the Middle Ages. That is, paradigms of modern economy and politics are derived from Christian theology. The idea of God, for example, underlies the transcendence of economic power (theory of sovereignty and biopolitics).

Here Agamben makes a genealogy between the Greek concept of *oikonomia* and that of political economy, arguing that there is, in Western thought, a correspondence between theological conceptions of the world’s divine government and the knowledge and practices of political government in history. For him, our republican tradition inherited this theological paradigm in its governmental machine, in which one perceives, in the modern art of governing, the occurrence of an association between such a practice and a supposed divinely instituted order. Following the lineage of Michel Foucault’s research on the genealogy of governmentality, Agamben’s research (2011, p. 7) sought “the paths by which and the reasons why power in the West assumed the form of an *oikonomia*, that is, a government of men.” Thus, he identifies how the “economic trinity” device helps explain the form of government, the workings and the articulation of the modern governmental machine. He also identifies glory and economy in the acclamatory form of consensus, as a hallmark of contemporary democracies. In short, modern economy and politics

maintain the theological model of world government. “Modernity, having removed God from the world, not only has not exited theology, but it has only, in a certain sense, brought to completion the project of providential oikonomia” (Agamben, 2011, p. 184).

If in Agamben we have an analysis of Economic Theology, another author weaves an important theological critique of Political Economy: Karl Marx. In *On the Jewish Question*, for example, he weaves a critique of religion in bourgeois society and its relation to the Political State. For Marx, a religious state would be a less developed stage of the Political State, and thus the Christian state would be a *non-State*, which manifests not Christianity itself, but “the Christian denial of the state, but never the state realization of Christianity... the State of hypocrisy” (Marx, 2010, p. 43). Criticism would force that State to acknowledge its tortuosity.

A state which makes the gospel speak in the language of politics—that is, in another language than that of the Holy Ghost—commits sacrilege [...] The State which acknowledges Christianity as its supreme criterion, and the Bible as its Charter, must be confronted with the words of Holy Scripture, for every word of Scripture is holy. This State—as well as the human rubbish on which it is based—is caught in a painful contradiction that is insoluble from the standpoint of religious consciousness when it is referred to those sayings of the gospel (Marx, 2010, p. 44).

Criticisms of political theology appear not only sporadically in *On The Jewish Question*, but throughout Marx’s work. From this initial critique of the fusion between the State and the Christian religion, Marx moves on to another strategy: the economic critique of fetishism.

His insightful reader, Enrique Dussel (1993), revealed many theological positions in *As metáforas teológicas de Marx [The Theological Metaphors of Marx]*, by identifying, in the various stages and historical moments of Marx’s work, a discourse parallel to the economic-philosophical, which will be called metaphorical theology or Marx’s implicit theology.

An example of this is that Marx makes use of different biblical texts around his concepts. For example, he uses the biblical text of Philippians, chapter 2, to show the divinization of money under capital. In the mentioned excerpt, Jesus, as God, assumes the form of a servant, leading Marx to reflect on money, as a servant, assuming sacred form. That is, money in capitalist social relations would be like an inversion of Christ, or like the antichrist. Just as Christ, being God, assumed the figure of a servant, money, being the figure of a servant, became God. Christ humbled Himself and money became deified. What Marx does is to unveil a religious meaning hidden in the daily life of bourgeois society: the presence and action of a real, powerful, and secular god, which is the practical religion: money. Not by chance, in many of his works Marx uses the biblical text of Matthew, chapter 6, verses 19 to 24, on the impossibility of serving two masters: one may serve either God or money.

Contrary to what a superficial reading of Marx might claim, which is the idea of “religion as the opium of the people,” he does not say that God is dead, but rather that “Capital is a very living ‘god’ that demands human victims” (Dussel, 1993, p. 21) because it feeds on the lives of the poor. Marx criticizes the Christian clientelism, which operates in anti-revolutionary and reformist organizations, and he also criticizes the populist use of religion, which constantly seeks to preserve the conditions of domination through the defense of property, the family, religion, and order—conceptions that, historically, always emerge in conservative turns.

In this way, Marx shows that fetishistic religion operates as a justification of capitalist domination, to conceal that capital is accumulated surplus value and, as such, is objectification of unpaid labor, hence an unethical system. This is the fetishistic character of capital—an ideological mechanism that systematically seeks to hide the unethical essence of capital (Dussel, 1993, p. 17).

In this process criticizing the fetish over commodities, money, and capital, Marx points out that “a commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding

in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx, 2011, p. 121).

Therefore, he affirms that capital has a demonic character. It is a visible demon, because the daily exercise of praxis in the capitalist system involves a satanic action (Dussel, 1993, p. 15). Just like Moloch, a pagan god who demands sacrifice of human lives. Marx, among others, uses metaphors to adjectivize Capital, such as “demon,” “Beast of the apocalypse,” “Moloch,” “Mammon,” and “Baal,” showing an analogy between the religious and the economic world, making use of the ideological mechanism of fetishism and the systemic mechanisms that give divine characteristics to things and commodities (considering them eternal, infinite).

Marx clearly criticizes the bourgeois theological-economic support (much expressed in authors such as Adam Smith) and points out the existence of a sacrificial logic in capital, which sucks the workers’ blood. “From the beginning he also speaks of the alienated essence of labor as the worker’s death and the production by their own hands of their opposite, their enemy, the fetish as sacrifice” (Dussel, 1993, p. 48). Marx understands original sin exactly as a social relation that originates and conditions the current and unjust social order, which is a reality historically inherited. This sin is structural, it precedes and determines individual subjectivity, which arises from the social relations of domination, while also determining them—for example, freed-slaved, master-servant, capitalist-wage worker, man-woman, parents-children.

Marx’s strategy is to expose the contradictions of Christianity and the historical incarnation of the devil as an Antichrist power. If, on the one hand, in the gospel, Christ is a life giver, on the other hand, Capital is that which extracts the worker’s life. The sacrificial logic of capital takes the workers’ body and blood in offering in the cult of Moloch and the Beast that kills the human person and destroys nature.

In Marx, therefore, a critique of the Theology of Political Economy emerges, discovering the mechanisms of domination of capitalism as fetishistic, demonic, satanic, and idolatrous structures. This critique—that bourgeois atheism inherited by Marxists of various lineages prevents from seeing Marx—reveals itself as a powerful

resource for a radical critique of capital in its destructive structure and dynamics and of the fetishistic character of religion in the current scenario. The construction of new social relations requires the denial of the capitalist order divinization to make way for the religion of liberation and for human and environmental emancipation.

An interesting point is that both Agamben and Marx identify that Adam Smith’s metaphor of the “invisible hand” recalls similar expressions used by Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, among others, demonstrating, once again, theological substrata of modern political economy. The deconstruction of this model and system, consequently, requires the desecration of its apparatuses of sacredness (Agamben, 2011) and concrete experiences of emancipation and liberation (Marx, 2011; Dussel, 1993).

For this emancipation process, the dissolution of fear—which constitutes the operational substratum of many political-theological devices—is an important element. It is a political-theological foundation active in the world of affections, which are forged and circulated in the subjects. Safatle (2019) alludes to these political-theological assumptions in Freud’s work, showing that human fear and helplessness are substrata of the populations’ subjection to rulers, due to their searches for father figures of authority.

The correlation between God, sovereign above all, and the ruler to whom the people must submit as good faithful subjects is evident in different historic settings, as well as a theological substratum of subjectivation and subjection in the civic sphere. Deactivating the affective mechanisms of fear is a way to contribute to the contestation of power and its forms of economic and social domination, dethroning the ruler’s identification with the paternal-divine authority, engendering new affections and subjects that are critical to the relationship of subjection/dependence built under fear and social helplessness.

An important criticism of this mechanism appears in Espinosa (2009), when he makes a fissure in the political-theological thinking that attributes to God the absolute transcendence. The author thinks of the divine in its immanence, as a substance that pervades everything. God would not thus be above all, but among everything and

everyone. This theological construction holds the power to destroy the unique and monarchical figure of the isolated and authoritarian divinity in which the totalitarian political power of the sovereign is anchored, dismantling this political-theological logic of justifying absolute power in the ruler.

Finally, we highlight the contribution of Boaventura de Souza Santos (2014), in the work *Se Deus fosse um ativista de direitos humanos [If God Were a Human Rights Activist]*, in which he addresses the emergence of two preponderant political-theological axes in the current world: pluralist/progressive versus fundamentalist/traditionalist political theologies.

Many traditionalist and fundamentalist political theologies reject the distinction between the public and private sphere, attribute the monopoly of social life organization to religion, and justify the main means of social domination: capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy (Santos, 2014). They intervene in the public sphere, consider the bourgeois individualist religion as the standard of legitimate religious experience (prosperity theology, for example, seeks to legitimize the capitalist economy and its inequalities), and reject Western modernity, interpreting sacred scriptures as divine law and placing themselves on the opposite side of democratic regimes and women's rights. This phenomenon appears strongly in the United States, Latin America, Africa, and Asia and is known as the new Christian right, involving a very mobilized network of organizations, people, and churches, with themes such as abortion, homosexuality, teaching the theory of evolution in schools, threat of humanist secularism and minority rights, morality, patriotism, etc. Such conservatives commonly support authoritarianism to re-Christianize the State and Society and their "priority is conversion and not conversation" (Santos, 2014, p. 96). Ultimately, this concept acts as "sacrificial violence," already pointed out by Marx.

Pluralistic theologies, on the other hand, conceive God's revelation as a contribution to the public life and political organization of society, while accepting the autonomy and distinction between public and private life. They are based on the distinction between the religion of the oppressed

and the oppressors and criticize the institutional religion as that of the oppressors, while they consider to be illegitimate the analyze religion without considering the relations of production within the framework of Western modernity. For Santos (2014), such progressive theologies can help to recover the humanity of Human Rights since they present conceptions about human dignity in which God guarantees the freedom and autonomy of social struggles. They believe that God's action takes place precisely in the struggles against oppression and show that divinity is involved in the histories of oppressed peoples in their struggles for liberation (example of Latin American Liberation Theology and Black theology, as well as in the dialogues between theology, ecology, and feminist movements, etc.).

With a brief look at this field of controversies, we have more elements to launch an analytical look at the theological substrata in the workings of state power and in the sociocultural dynamics of the Brazilian reality, in addition to perceiving their challenging implications for policies, practices, and conceptions in Collective Health.

Political theologies in the contemporary Brazilian scenario

To observe some political-theological manifestations in the Brazilian scenario, we focused our gaze on the evangelical segment. This group grew in recent years, going from only 5% in 1970 to 1/3 of the Brazilian population in 2020 and, agreeing with Spyer (2020), we affirm that it is not possible to understand the current Brazil without considering its presence and performance.

They are Christian segments, rather than a homogeneous group, that differ from each other by their historical, theological, and practical-liturgical roots of a Protestant, Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal nature. Evangelicals are heterogeneous groups also in terms of social class and moral values. The very term "evangelicals" became a category in dispute in Brazilian society. While there is the massive presence of more conservative and even proto-fascist discourses among them, there are also resurgences of evangelical Christianity of liberation, albeit to a lesser extent.

This was visible in the pandemic scenario, in which two distinct models of political theology emerged in the public manifestations of evangelical sectors: fundamentalist political theologies, in support of the configuration of political power in the executive sphere, and political theologies of resistance and emancipation, present among many emerging socio-religious movements.

This typology does not assert the existence of an overwhelming Manichaeism or dualism, but draws attention to a heterogeneous reality with a mosaic of matrices with different gradations.

On the more reactionary-fundamentalist evangelical side there are clear manifestations of a political theology that reaffirms executive power by reinforcing the idea of the “God’s elect,” the “divine chosen” to govern the country. Much of this segment gives theological support to liberal, authoritarian, ruralist, and anti-human rights policies. Some leaders and pastors, for example, assiduously appear on social networks to justify government actions, strengthening the strategy of diminishing the media’s role by delegitimizing it, eroding the image of other powers of the republic and exalting the executive’s ruler as a leader raised by God to rid the Brazilian people of their great enemies: corruption in politics by left-wing parties and the demoralization of the traditional family by policies of sexual diversity and gender; they defend anti-homosexuality, anti-left, and anti-abortion agendas, conservatism in customs, a liberal economy and authoritarianism in ways of governing.

These evangelical sectors representatives also assumed political function in federal positions and ministries. The rise of traditionalist/fundamentalist evangelicals in politics, however, is not a recent phenomenon. Since the beginning of 2000 their performance has been noticeable in the National Congress, the appearance of the social figure of the “political-pastor” (people who use their religious positions to assume political positions) with their presence in strategic positions in the Ministry of Education, of Justice, the Brazilian Office of the General Attorney, and Special Secretariats, in addition to creating the evangelical caucus and having an active presence in the Committee on Human Rights of the Chamber, which is always

supportive of the agendas of agribusiness, mining, the arms industry, against women’s rights and in favor of tax exemption for religious temples, etc. (Cunha, 2020a). Evangelicals aligned with the patriarchal, landowning, and colonialist culture, while seeking for power and party-political influence, accuse feminist, Black and workers’ movements of being enemies of the faith and the traditional family (Cunha, 2020a).

This presence/performance gained more strength since the last presidential election, in which the religious appeal was widely used in electoral campaigns. Very precise attacks were made by politicians with religious leaders in the run-up to the 2018 election campaign, among Protestants, Pentecostals, and neo-Pentecostals. From this, the idea of truth as a political platform force and the use of Bible verses as a slogan may have emerged (Py, 2021).

This strategy sensitizes the believer and makes way for credibility with the infusion of ideas and mobilizations against “cultural Marxism,” the supposed leftist indoctrination in universities and public schools (leading to the defense of proposals such as the *Escola Sem Partido* – ‘School without Party’); opposition to “collectivism,” seen as totalitarianism; aversion to “gender ideology”; demonization of social movements and pathologization of groups and parties as “*esquerdopatia*” (“*esquerda*” means left and “*-patia*” is the suffix for “-pathy” as a disorder); criticism of what is called “politically correct”; attachment to tradition; exposure of so-called “hypocrisies” in society; and fierce defense of individual freedom above collective interests. The solution chosen to counter the supposed communist threat is to elect politicians who claim to defend the nation. Thus, the populational circle of juridical-theological legitimation of the right is expanded by the moral discourse of the fight against corruption and defense of the traditional bourgeois family around slogans such as “God, Nation and Family.”

The evangelical milieu holds some political-theological facilitators for such processes and for their identification with populist-authoritarian figures. One is the pyramidal structure of many churches, whose leaders are understood to be representatives of God’s voice that guides the divine

flock on earth. At the same time, many theological knowledges that circulate in the evangelical milieu recall the figures and language of sovereignty such as “Kingdom,” “Power,” “Glory,” and, in the same way, the military metaphor is always present. Some liturgical songs give Jesus the character of “General,” “Captain” who guides the “army of God,” which, in the social context, can function as a positive legitimation of the militarized State.

Moreover, prosperity theology—which among other things understands that the sign of God’s blessing is individual economic progression—is the economic face of this political theology, in a clear contemporary example of the fetishized religion pointed out by Marx, since it promotes concealment of the social relations of production, of inequities in the wealth distribution and of forms of workers’ exploitation. Many moral agendas gain more attention among these groups than social, economic, environmental policies, etc. As Žižek (2015) points out, when Christianity erects itself as true, it holds its political representative as a divine agent, and therefore one can do all evil in the name of truth without any restraint or culpability.

Another important facilitator is the value of the spoken word. The testimony generates much effect among the members of this culture, and thus many videos with distorted information about politics and public health, enunciated as a religious testimony, gain a “status of truth.” Not by chance, the evangelical milieu was identified as a space of great circulation of fake news (Fonseca; Days; 2021), mostly about mistrust in science and pseudo-true news about fighting the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the context of the pandemic, this political-theological strand mobilized some hermeneutics and social praxis. Magical-religious explanations were given about the origin of the pandemic, bringing, as the root cause of this suffering, the divine punishment, resulting from human disbelief and blasphemy.

Many of these groups advocated for maintaining the religious temples open during the pandemic, arguing the importance of social-psychological service, typical of churches, typified in the National Association of Evangelical Jurists’ (ANAJURE)

eagerness for the preservation of freedom and the opening of the temples in times of lockdown.

They also supported, indistinctly, the action/omission of the Union in the face of the pandemic, which, in turn, evidenced its political-theological substratum in the subjection of the life of the Brazilian population to a power of death, in an expression of Agamben’s figure of the *Homo Sacer* (2007). The naked and exposed life of the majority of the Brazilian population, in fact, typified not an unprecedented setback of democratic institutions, but the “state of exception as a rule” (Agamben, 2007). The high mortality from COVID-19 in Brazil and its relation to the federal denial of responsibility in the fight against the pandemic points to the current exercise of political power as “life for fight” and not “fight for life” (Eco, 2019, p. 52). The cult of death, violence, and the State’s tendency towards denying responsibility, allowing social relations to become spontaneous and unregulated (Lessa, 2020), had broad social acceptance among population sectors, most likely due to their operational logics based on political theologies. Undeniably, as Araújo and Pereira (2021) assert, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil are closely related to the neo-fascist political tangle, riddled with fake news, denialism, and the use of God’s name to deconstruct republican values of ethics and justice.

On the other hand, on the public scene, expressions of political theologies of resistance emerged among counter-hegemonic religious movements. There were a resurgence of groups, leaders, organizations, churches, and alliances of evangelical churches in opposition to the government’s policy and to the fundamentalism as a legitimate way of living the Christian faith.

Critical discussions in evangelical lives, the creation of the popular evangelical caucus for 2020 municipal elections, the support of evangelical pastors for social movements, and the reorganization of left-wing political parties are just a few examples of progressive evangelical activism. Likewise, the presence of theologians and pastors in active militancy in social networks was noticeable with the creation and dissemination of content criticizing most evangelical churches’ posture in the pandemic as well as exposing the negligence by the executive

authorities regarding the death and illness of Brazilians by COVID-19.

Moreover, many public statements and acts have come to light, as well as manifestos written by organized groups and opponents of government practices, structural racism, environmental degradation, and patriarchy of Brazilian society. Examples are the *Manifesto de Mulheres Negras Evangélicas* (Manifesto..., 2020) [Manifesto of Black Evangelical Women]; the call to confront the pandemic in a letter entitled *O governante sem discernimento aumenta as opressões: Um clamor de fé pelo Brasil* (Cunha, 2020b) [The ruler without discernment increases oppressions: A cry of faith for Brazil]; *Nota de Repúdio de organizações evangélicas sobre a decisão do Ministro Kássio Nunes Marques* [Statement of Repudiation of evangelical organizations on Minister Kássio Nunes Marques's decision], on the opening of temples and churches in the face of mortality from COVID-19 (Nota..., 2020); and the seminars and lives organized to discuss the political moment such as the *Seminário internacional: Tragédia brasileira: risco para a casa comum?* [International seminar: Brazilian tragedy: risk to the common home?] (Seminário..., 2021), organized by a series of religious and human rights organizations, in addition to the defense of sociobiodiversity, bringing together researchers, activists, and religious people of different beliefs.

Such movements acted against the tendency to minimize the suffering caused by the pandemic, and many social ties and aid networks were mobilized/strengthened by communities and religious groups in these moments. Socio-anthropological research demonstrate that the performance of evangelical churches brings positive results, especially in places where the State does not act, functioning as an "informal welfare state" (Spyer, 2020, p. 99) and creating solidarity networks among "populations discarded by society" (SPYER, 2020, p. 155). They mobilize support for the homeless population, drug addicts, and women victims of violence, assist the reintegration of ex-convicts, encourage believers to study, among other elements.

In the sense of hermeneutics and praxis in the pandemic, this other evangelical pole manifested an important response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

the participation of these churches and leaderships in the phenomenon of active citizenship, in networks of mutual aid and community engagement. They are endogenous networks when dealing with religious groups, but exogenous, ecumenical, and plural as to the members that occupy them.

An example was notified by the Brazilian Association of Public Health (Abrasco), when more than 200 civil society entities came together to confront COVID-19, creating the *Rio pela Vida - mobilização para vencer a Covid-19* [Rio for Life - mobilization to defeat COVID-19], a pact involving political, cultural, union, scientific and religious leaders, including evangelical churches (Movimentos..., 2021). There were many cases of pastors mobilizing help requests on their social networks, seeking to influence in the fight against COVID-19 and increase the number of hospital beds and supplies, or even denouncing cases of corruption and funds embezzlement.

These mobilizations of community engagement, involving NGOs and neighborhood associations organized aid in vulnerable communities (fight against hunger, food supply, food distribution, collection of aid, etc), functioned as mutual aid groups and can be analyzed as allies of Collective Health, to the extent that they were part of the popular responses to the populations' health problems (Ortega; Behague, 2020).

These theologies of resistance come from an awareness of the fraying of capitalist sociability relations and their racist, exclusionary, sexist, and patriarchal crossings. They ground relations of solidarity and act on the logic of political love as a language of social transformation, as pointed out by Chela Sandoval in *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), while they manifest the active presence of construction of new subjects, based on a subjectivity critical of the forms of subjectivation of neoliberalism.

These evangelical groups operate in a logic distinct from political theology that places God as a figure above people, but they are anchored in the idea of Christ among all and in all, according to Spinoza's critique. That is, they live in the logic of a Christ who suffers with minorities and assumes "the burden of suffering in solidarity with human

misery” (Zizek, 2015, p. 132). These are the groups that operate a theological critique of the market and capitalism, that demystify reality in the direction of undoing the “theological tricks” of the commodity fetish and capital, as Marx asserted (Marx, 2011; Zizek, 2015; Dussel, 1993), in rescue of the beliefs of more libertarian strands of theology.

Possible dialogue between Political Theology and Collective Health

To conclude, we highlight that political theology, as a fruitful philosophical area, offers an epistemological contribution to analyses in the field of Collective Health (CH), capable of grounding other interpretations on the Brazilian socio-political conjuncture, in dialogue with the Marxist, organizational, systemic, and comprehensive epistemic traditions that, as a rule, guide the production of scientific knowledge in CH. New investigations can carefully evaluate the implications of political theologies in the formulation and execution of policies of interest to health in Brazil.

A point of great relevance for the CH in the current conjuncture is to increase the knowledge on the effects of conservatism and theocratic fundamentalism for the policies and daily life of health practices in the country. This requires greater approximation of CH researchers to the different social groups to which such worldviews exert a clear influence, for example, evangelicals with a traditionalist political-theological orientation. As science, and CH, move away from this portion of the population, more opportunities are opened for manipulations by populist politicians, and also for the recrudescence of conceptions contrary to the right to universal health and the promotion of social and economic policies to reduce the risk of diseases. After all, when intellectuals conduct science in a way that is distant from the people, other figures emerge, capturing popular desires and needs, such as fundamentalist evangelical pastors (Santos, 2020). The advancement of more traditionalist/fundamentalist political theologies can hinder the achievement and implementation of rights that aim to improve the health of specific populations, such as LGBTQIA+, women,

quilombolas, Indigenous people, people who are encamped or settlers, etc.

The scientific, institutional and political community of the CH should increase understanding of the different strata of evangelicals’ knowledge and practices in relation to the health-disease-care process, health policies and the Unified Health System (SUS), expanding the dialogue on health issues among these groups and reducing the distance between the knowledge production about health and the experiences of knowledge production about health, which holds presuppositions in fundamentalist political theologies and in those that are more progressive.

Understanding morbimortality and the responses of governments and society to the COVID-19 pandemic requires attention to the religious sociocultural dynamics and political theologies at work in the current socio-political scenario. In a social context of State reduction, dismantling of social policies, sharpening of class inequalities, race, gender, increase in violence, unemployment, and exploitation of the environment and work, it is important to recognize the place of evangelical groups as spheres of social normatization, since they form opinions, model behaviors, create meanings and mobilize collective actions. In this direction, the emerging movements of evangelical feminists, Black people, ecology, LGBTQIA+ can be important interlocutors for compression-action regarding the most universalist political theologies and defense of health, policies to protect women, Black populations, environmental justice, and sexual diversity.

In conclusion, this brief text aims to reflect on a field within Political Philosophy that still wasn’t summoned to the field of CH. It was sought to demonstrate the validity of political theologies as a substratum of the exercise of state power, and their sociocultural dynamics among religious groups in the Brazilian public scene, as a theme deserving of greater attention from the CH, after all, they mediate the responses of society sectors and public policies to the population’s health problems.

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Authors' contribution

Leão conceived the project, conducted bibliographic research, data analysis and interpretation, text writing and critical intellectual review, and worked on the writing of the final version.

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