

Article

Pandemic Religion in Brazil—Temptation and Responsibility

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Abstract: Religious incidence in Brazilian public space is a widespread fact that has been gaining new visibility in pandemic times. Responsibility in liminal situations represents specific theological hermeneutics, as well as what matters for the respective religious agents. Thus, based on a bibliographical review connected to an analysis of websites, this article aims to reflect on the current Brazilian context, the challenges to doing theology in Brazil today and points to some possible responses. “Pandemic religion”, as we call it, is the synthesis of theologies and religious practices that legitimise irresponsible approaches to life, vulnerabilising the other instead of assuming care-based ethics. Firstly, we briefly describe current theological trends, followed by an analysis of the Brazilian scenario by way of three representative scenes of public religious incidence that reflect a lack of responsibility in view of the pandemic challenges caused by COVID-19. Subsequently, we look back into history for alternative responses to public health crises that required theological positioning. In a Brazilian perspective of a public theology, we finally reflect on a responsible ethics that may help respond to the current challenges, particularly for pandemic religion.

Keywords: Brazil; public theology; neo-pentecostalism; religion and politics; COVID-19 pandemic



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1. Introduction

Brazil is currently in a health crisis that may be described as sanitary, but also as an issue of sanity. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic shed some light on different kinds of pandemics that were already in existence even before COVID-19. The so called disinfodemic, which played a significant role in recent elections—becoming, among others, a focus of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (UNESCO) attention that, in its agenda, includes a call for researchers to assume this dimension in their investigations (Posetti and Bontcheva 2020)—has produced new victims within the coronavirus pandemic crisis, where people are misled into ineffective and even dangerous “prevention” practices (like the use of Chloroquine¹) and the virus’ risk is equally dangerously downplayed. The already traditional “pandemic” of exclusion comes once again to the fore when apparently simple hygienic practices such as washing hands are unavailable for a considerable part of the population who does not have access to piped water or basic sanitation. As the late African American theologian Brown (n.d.) used to say, access to water is one concrete way to evaluate inequality. São Paulo, the richest Brazilian city, only on facing the pandemic decided to install places for homeless people to get access to piped water (Dantas 2020). What to say of those for whom staying at home is not viable as they have to go out to work, to collect recyclables or pursue other mostly informal ways of earning money (cf. Santos et al. 2020)—raising once again the question well established by (Boff and Boff [1985] 2010) during the 1980s: How to be a Christian in a world of miserable people?

Last July, numbers in Brazil reached around 19 million cases and over 550 thousand deaths due to COVID-19. The epidemiologist Pedro Hallal, called to testify before the Senate’s parliamentary inquiry committee (*Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito—CPI*), was clear in explaining that four in every five deaths could have been avoided with good

practices of prevention and with the purchase of vaccines since the very first moment they were available ([Senado Federal 2021](#)). This scenario leads to the hypothesis that Brazil is facing not only an unsanitary environment, but also an insane one, where responsible scientific-based actions are overshadowed by unfounded opinions, wild conspiracy theories and irresponsible beliefs. This insane/unsanitary situation is seasoned with a religious ingredient that leads us to the title of this article. What we call pandemic religion² denotes the hegemonic attempt, by religious leaders, to seek power, to justify violence and to understate or even contradict COVID-19 prevention measures. When religion leads to neglecting the risk of the virus, when it echoes misinformation or creates disinformation, when it sides with political powers that do not care for the life of the people, especially the poor, when the pandemic of exclusion is not faced but legitimised, we are dealing with a kind of religion that seeks to rule rather than to serve, to destroy rather than to edify, to disdain rather than to care. As such a religious presence, especially—but not exclusively—of some *evangélico*³ leaders and tendencies is new in its magnitude and impact, spreading rapidly, and tends to seek influence over the whole of the nation in a hegemonic rather than a minoritarian project (cf. [Burity 2020](#)), we call it *pandemic religion*. It is here addressed in a two-fold movement: a critical-analytical and a constructive-propositional. The first analyses the public incidence of religion in Brazil during the pandemic through the reflection on three scenes that may provide a contour of what we call pandemic religion; the second responds theologically to it based, mainly, on the Lutheran tradition. Before that, however, some recent Latin American theological developments are presented in order to contextualise the discussion.

The correlation between religion and the new coronavirus pandemic has already brought forth some interesting reflections in the theological field. Marcelo Alarcón has edited a series of e-books gathering short opinion articles written by many well-known theologians and thinkers connected to Latin America: Leonardo Boff, Michael P. Moore, Sonia Montecinos, Manuel A. Carretón, José I. González Faus, Frei Betto, Consuelo Vélez, Sor Lucía Caram, Juan J. Tamayo (e.g., [Codina et al. 2020](#); [Spadaro et al. 2020](#); [D’Ors et al. 2020](#)). Brazilian theological journals such as *Estudos Teológicos* and *Caderno Teológico* published dossiers on COVID-19. The former, asking who and what is left out or lost in the pandemic, poses the question beyond the virus as such by acknowledging, on the one hand, the philosophical and theological background of responses to the pandemic with the perception of the fear of death and the accentuation of the already existing social isolation with the resulting opposition of *immunitas* and *communitas*. On the other hand, it recognises that there is an economic element at the bottom of the issue, in which an ethics of consumerism leads to an unhealthy relationship with nature ([Barsalini et al. 2020](#)). The latter emphasises the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to the problem, making explicit some political and religious reactions to the virus, research within universities during the pandemic, as well as some philosophical intersections with this sanitary crisis ([Carneiro et al. 2020](#)). In a broader sense, but still considering theological responses to the pandemic, the collective book *O ser humano em tempos de COVID-19* (“The human being in times of COVID-19”) reflects on aspects such as God, fear, hope, frailty, suffering, family and education based on approaches from the humanities ([Pilla and von Sinner 2020](#)). This brief *status quaestionis* points to some interesting elements that are featured in this article: the urgent need to elaborate on religious responses to the pandemic; the necessity of a wider interdisciplinary approach to the pandemic and its social impact; the reflection on the human condition in view of a liminal situation; the possibility of a metaphorical use of the pandemic idea as a tool that may help analyse a broader scenario that predates the coronavirus pandemic and will probably continue in post-pandemic times.

2. Recent Brazilian Theological Developments

For an overview of the theological scene in the Brazilian context, it is helpful to start by making a distinction between ecclesial and investigative theology. Both occur in academic environments, for instance in theological seminaries whose purpose is, mainly,

to educate future ministers in connection with some specific confession, as well as in confessional universities. Critical theology may help evaluate and shape ecclesial practices and understandings. Recently, especially with the growth of online education, the offer of undergraduate courses in theology has increased significantly. Still, one might elaborate the distinction between an investigative theology that works with academic rules, based on critical foundations that may constantly be put into question, and an ecclesial theology that has a commitment to some confessional truths that, even when taking place in academic spaces, will always be the expression of some particular church's self-understanding (cf. Villas Boas 2018; Gmainer-Pranzl and Jacobsen 2016). Following up with the intention to point to current tendencies in the Brazilian Christian scene, we address theology under the sign of four theological trends: *liberation*, *interculturality*, *Spirit*, and *prosperity*.

Liberation theology has developed into different contextual approaches such as feminist theology, black theology, indigenous theology, and, more recently, decolonial theology. Besides, liberation theologians have realised the necessity to specifically adapt to democratic and urban contexts. Assmann (1994) noticed the possibility to continue liberation theology with an emphasis on solidarity and citizenship. Comblin (1991) and others (Sanchez 2013; Susin 2014) recognised the cities as an important question to broaden reflections. Public theology, as an heir to liberation theologies' discussions, in Brazil has been expanding some of these themes such as the matter of citizenship (von Sinner 2012; Zeferino 2018). These topics may reflect a necessity to more complex theoretical approaches in which the access to the *saeculum* happens in the life lived in plural, diversified, always moving cities. At stake is a theology that dialogues with the world in its totality, not only a, sometimes ideological, fraction of it (von Sinner 2018, 2021).

In deep connection with the liberationist theological trend, the diversity of religions and cultures in the Latin American context calls for interculturality and inter-religious dialogue. Thus, theologies of religious pluralism, or theologies of religions, arise as modes to translate this religious and cultural diversity often valuing indigenous religions (Irrazaval 2007), a wider comprehension of what is (the) "Real" (Vigil 2006), or even an attempt to connect African and Indigenous perspectives (Barros 2009; cf. Ribeiro 2021).

"Under the sign of the Spirit" we may consider the ever-growing Pentecostal movement. According to the latest demographic census (IBGE 2010), around 22% of the Brazilian people are *evangélico*, and the biggest part of it may be counted as Pentecostal. It is difficult to embrace all Pentecostal branches in an analysis, although by paying attention to some of the most representative churches, such as the *Assembleias de Deus* (Assemblies of God), it is possible to point out some tendencies. These churches have an eschatological preaching based on the idea of dispensations in which, before the end of the times and following a series of different manners for God to reveal Godself to humanity, we live in the age of the Spirit. The hermeneutics is literalist, understanding that God is the author of the Bible. Due to its eschatological perspective, awaiting the imminent return of Christ, only after the redemocratisation from 1986 onwards there can be seen a wider involvement in partidary politics (von Sinner 2018). Nowadays, this presence is highlighted by parties such as Republicanos (*Republicans*) and Partido Social Cristão (*Christian Social Party*) that are related to the *Assembleias de Deus* and the *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (IURD), respectively (Cunha 2018).

The IURD especially leads us to our fourth tendency, which is theology "under the sign of prosperity". Neo-Pentecostalism, it must be said, is the only one of the movements presented here that does not have any academic presence. However, it has been widely studied in the last decades (Campos 1997; Mariano 2012; Esperandio 2006; Gabatz 2017). Since the 1970s, this theological perspective has emphasised personal prosperity and is well known by its presence in the media. The IURD also draws attention due to its temples, notably the "Temple of Solomon" in São Paulo and the *Templo Maior* ("Great Temple") in Curitiba (von Sinner 2021). The hermeneutics are literalist, and the eschatology is directed to the present: to be happy, healthy and prosperous right here, right now. This approach tends to neglect the contradictions of life, signalling that for the believer all things are

possible; when things do not go well, the problem is the lack of faith. This faith is tested by sacrifices, mainly financial ones, that may lead the believer into prosperity (or ruin). One could perceive in this perspective a lack of responsibility with the believer who is led into an ambiguity-free ethics focused on the individual's progress in life.

These last two tendencies are at the core of the three selected episodes that may provide us with a snapshot of the current Brazilian situation when the matter is religious presence in the public sphere. The pandemic is the background in which each of these scenes is situated.

3. Pandemic Religion Scenes

Jair Messias Bolsonaro was elected to the presidency of the Republic with significant support from both Catholics and *evangélicos*. It is estimated that around 29 million Catholics and 21 million *evangélicos* voted for Bolsonaro, in comparison to the approximate 28 million Catholics and nine million *evangélicos* who voted for the candidate of the Labour Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*—PT) (Alves 2018; Almeida 2019). It is possible to note that, in absolute numbers, many more Catholics than *evangélicos* supported Bolsonaro, but the number of *evangélico* voters made the difference, corresponding roughly to the difference of votes between the two candidates.

Religious presence and propaganda did not stop with the election. *Evangélico* leaders and politicians became part of the administration. In different, yet important roles, there is the visible presence of Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Catholics and Pentecostals (Py 2020). Furthermore, religious leaders appear close to the president in a number of moments, especially in 2020, but in a more reduced way in 2021 (Py 2021). The year 2020, of course, was also when the coronavirus pandemic spread all over the world, reaching Brazil in March. The religious element once more became visible. We selected three scenes that may illustrate a very perceptible Brazilian Christian public scenario.

3.1. First Scene—The Opening of Temples

The first scene consists of what we understand as a mediatic campaign for the reopening of on-site church services during the pandemic. From 27 July to 2 August 2020, the Brazilian TV Channel Record, owned by Edir Macedo, founder and supreme bishop of one of the most expressive Neo-Pentecostal churches in Brazil, the IURD, broadcasted a series of reports on the urgency of (re-)opening churches during the pandemic. Their main newscast, *Jornal da Record* (2020) (JR), dedicated over 40 min to this topic from Monday to Friday (27–31 July).

With JR reports it is possible to systematise the main topics that were presumably part of JR's own claim: 1. A Federal Decree (Decree nr. 10.292, of 25th March 2020) declared religious services essential activities during the pandemic in contraposition to many mayors and governors who decreed churches must shut down their temples for sanitary reasons. 2. Religious practices were affected by the pandemic by the action of governors and mayors, in disregard to the central importance faith has for the people. 3. There was popular support for reopening the temples. 4. Churches followed all safety protocols. 5. The discontentment of religious leaders and believers with the actions of mayors and governors may have been reflected in the elections (that were about to happen that same year). 6. The relationship between faith (spirituality) and health based on science, as well as the emotional and spiritual support churches provide against anxiety and depression, supported the vision of churches as spiritual hospitals. 7. Social action was relevant and had been undermined by the closing of temples. 8. Churches provided a place of refuge for women who suffer domestic abuse.

The main issue faced by this mediatic campaign was the closing of temples in hundreds of Brazilian cities. The theme is treated as highly representative. However, according to data provided by JR itself, when the first report was aired there were only around 500 cities in this situation, less than 10% of all Brazilian cities. It seems that what disturbed the editorial was that some cities with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants were still restricting on-site services. Some of these cities and mayors were constantly named and, thus, exposed. This

context leads us to interrogate whether the reasons for this mediatic campaign differ from the ones that were made explicit in the reports. The decrease in income of certain churches, for instance, could be addressed as a possible motivation for reopening the temples (cf. Nascimento 2020; Dip et al. 2020). In any case, what we may emphasise here is that, during the worst pandemic within a century, a TV channel connected to a representative Christian church in the Brazilian context used its public influence to force mayors and governors into easing restrictions on church activities that may have as a side effect the rise of COVID-19 cases and deaths, rather than taking on its responsibility to care for people's lives by following all possible paths to reduce contagion.

3.2. Second Scene—The Messianic Easter

In September 2019, Edir Macedo anointed President Bolsonaro in the IURD's so-called Temple of Solomon (Unigrejas Oficial 2019). With the pandemic, when the popularity of the president started to decline in view of the government's incompetent handling of the situation, Macedo and other leaders, mainly from the Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal field but counting also on the support of some leaders from historical Protestantism in Brazil, used another religious symbol to support the president: they made a call for a fasting day for Palm Sunday during the Easter period. Bolsonaro is represented as a good Christian, and as a type of messiah, someone who has suffered and overcame death in order to save the nation. Here it is important to remember that during the electoral campaign Bolsonaro was hospitalised after being stabbed. All of it forms part of the narrative that sets the president as someone elected by God to defeat evil (as represented by left wing parties, communism, etc.) in a manicheistic war fought intensively, especially in social media (Py 2020). The video produced for this event was widely shared. It starts with a biblical verse and shows the president convening *the ones who believe* for a day of fasting. After that the video indicates that the main *evangélico* leaders of the country attended a call made by the president to summon the army of Christ for the biggest fasting campaign of all time in Brazil. Many leaders are shown endorsing this call: R. R. Soares (*Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus*), André Valadão (*Igreja Batista da Lagoinha*), Rene Toledo (*Batistas do Estado de Minas Gerais*), Silas Câmara (*Frente Parlamentar Evangélica*), Lourival de Almeida e Débora Miranda (*Igreja Pentecostal Deus é Amor*), Abner Ferreira (*Convenção Nacional das Assembleias de Deus Madureira*), Juanribe Pagliarin (*Comunidade Cristã Paz e Vida*), Abe Huber (*Paz Church*), Mário de Oliveira (*Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular*), Jorge Linhares (*Igreja Batista Getsêmani*), José Wellington Júnior (*Convenção Geral das Assembleias de Deus*), Marco Feliciano (*Catedral do Avivamento*), Renê Terra Nova (*Ministério Internacional da Restauração*), Edir Macedo and Ester Bezerra (*Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*), Roberto de Lucena (*Igreja O Brasil para Cristo*), Samuel Ferreira (*Assembleia de Deus Brás*), Robson Rodovalho (*Sara Nossa Terra*), Valdemiro Santiago (*Igreja Mundial do Poder de Deus*), Hernandes Dias Lopes (*Igreja Presbiteriana do Brasil*), Luiz Hermínio (*Mevam*), Abílio Santana (*Assembleia de Deus Madureira Salvador*), Roberto Brasileiro Silva (*Igreja Presbiteriana do Brasil*), Ezenete Rodrigues (*Igreja Batista da Lagoinha*), Márcio Valadão (*Igreja Batista da Lagoinha*), Guilherme Batista (*Conexão Estudantil e Universitária*), Valdomiro Pereira (*Convenção Estadual das Assembleias de Deus da Bahia*), Humberto Schimitt Vieira (*Igreja Pentecostal Assembleia de Deus Ministério Restauração*), Agenor Duque e Ingrid Duque (*Igreja Apostólica Plenitude do Trono de Deus*), André Fernandes (*Igreja Batista da Lagoinha*), Estevam Hernandez (*Igreja Renascer em Cristo*), Silas Malafaia (*Assembleia de Deus Vitória em Cristo*), and Samuel Câmara (*Convenção da Assembleia de Deus no Brasil*) (cf. *Igreja Batista Getsêmani* 2020).

In sum, the most representative Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal churches, as well as some historical churches, had their main leaders involved in this fasting campaign as an *evangélico* response concerning the pandemic. Some of the leaders who appear in the video are also politicians, an element that reinforces the long-standing but reconfigured connection between faith and politics within the Brazilian scenario. These leaders even “prophesy” a bright future, with God liberating Brazil from the evil of the virus as well as a wealthy future after the pandemic: At the end of that fasting month, Brazil counted no more

than 2500 deaths by COVID-19, and the *evangélico* prophets proclaimed that the numbers would remain low. However, as the future would prove, they were clearly mistaken, and, one could say, irresponsible as they not only downplayed the seriousness and lethality of the virus, but actively promoted agglomerations prone to spreading the virus.

The following Sunday, 12 April, *TV Brasil*, a TV channel from the government, broadcasted an Easter service with the president in which many of the already cited religious leaders and others, such as Iris Abravanel—wife of Silvio Santos, the owner of the TV Channel *SBT*, whose son-in-law, Fabio Faria, is currently the Minister of Communications—and Reginaldo Manzotti, a Catholic priest who runs the “Catholic Inspiration” TV channel called *TV Evangelizar* (TV BrasilGov 2020), were present. This picture unveils some of the heavy support the president received from Catholics, *evangélicos*, and from notorious media outlets (cf. Zeferino and de Andrade 2020).

Certainly, the problem we point to here is not recurring to a spiritual resource as an element of coping regarding a liminal situation such as the pandemic. The case in point is when a religious platform supports the neglect of prevention protocols, as well as provides an ineffective magical solution. The use of public television to broadcast a Christian service may also raise the matter of a non-isonomic treatment of other religions, as well as portraying an alliance between the government and some specific groups of the Christian sector. Indeed, the *evangélico* partners of the president even pose themselves as the more representative figures in that field, as it was possible to notice when another group of religious leaders elaborated a request to impeach Bolsonaro (Wettermann 2021).

3.3. Third Episode—The Magic Beans Tree

The Public Ministry, on its federal and local instances in Brazil, has been investigating COVID-19 cure promises related to religious practices (Tasinaffo 2020). Valdemiro Santiago, entitled apostle within his church (*Igreja Mundial do Poder de Deus*), propagated the purchase of special bean seeds that were seen as endowed with the power to cure COVID-19, which triggered an official disclaimer of the Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency (ANVISA) stating that there are no recognised means for a cure of COVID-19 at this moment. R. R. Soares (*Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus*) and Silvio Ribeiro (*Catedral Global do Espírito Santo*) are also under investigation for practices in their religious activities that may have misled believers into discrediting or neglecting health measures due to their belief in a supernatural COVID-19 cure (Tasinaffo 2020).

After being exposed, Valdemiro’s church released a disclaimer on the healing seeds episode on their YouTube channel. In a video called “*A verdade sobre o propósito da semente*” (“the truth about the seed purpose”), it is explained that the real meaning of the “seed purpose” is that making a purpose means entering a pact with God where someone offers something to God in gratitude of receiving something. This practice is presented as very common in the Bible in the figures of Jacob (Genesis 28), Paul (Acts 18) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1). Thus, the church, with the support of a lawyer, expressly stated that there was no selling of seeds and no explicit correlation between the planting of the seed and a cure (Igreja Mundial 2020). What is possible to highlight is that there is a retributive theology that grounds this theological understanding of the Bible.

The three scenes presented above provide some contours of what we call a pandemic religion. Another way to put it is to say that some kinds of religious expressions may recognise religion performing as a social disease, promoting unhealthy and insane responses to liminal situations. A significant number of Christians are represented by the churches and individuals nominated above. Thus, the Christian church as a whole will not come out of the pandemic clean in the Brazilian context. A retributive religion, where sacrifices are still needed, mark a misunderstanding of grace in which hegemonic power is supported, economic inequalities are legitimised and magic beans become believable (von Sinner 2021). The retributive system, in its deterministic sense, justifies violence and perpetrators as well as judges and condemns victims (Ricoeur 2006). The next topic discusses this religious scenario from a theological perspective, focusing mainly on the Lutheran tradition.

4. Temptation and Responsibility

One of the polemic issues was the measure of social isolation. There is a broad scientific consensus as to the absolute necessity of such measure in order to reduce the circulation of the virus and the infection of more people (WHO 2021). In some situations, local and state governments restricted or even forbade the realisation of masses and worship with a physically present public. Such measures were mostly well accepted by the churches, especially the older, well-established ones (e.g., IECLB 2020; Wolff and von Sinner 2020) but aroused the anger of some of the more visible Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal leaders, like Silas Malafaia and Edir Macedo. Quoting Psalm 91, namely verse 3: “For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence”, Malafaia encouraged the faithful not to fear the pandemic, to normally leave their houses and participate in church services (Pires 2020; Arnold and von Sinner 2020). Religious scientist Fábio Stern describes a religious aetiology of the coronavirus which understands it as God’s punishment for the movie *A primeira tentação de Cristo* (“The first temptation of Christ”) by the actor’s group *Porta dos Fundos* (“back door”) in which Jesus is represented as homosexual. It also understands only the rejected would suffer such punishment, while God’s elect (heterosexual, of course) could not be affected by COVID-19. This results in the idea that “to punish the *Porta dos Fundos*, God can wipe out [most of] humanity [and not only Brazil] from the face of the earth, as in this way people would “learn to no longer mock the things of God” (Stern 2020, pos. 1565).

An interesting narrative for this discussion can be found in the Gospel of Matthew (4:1–11) which tells about Jesus’ temptation in the desert. One of the tricks used by the devil is precisely to quote Psalm 91: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone’” (Matthew 4:6, quoting Psalm 91:11f. NRSV). Contrary to the argument brought forward by Malafaia, Jesus answers the tempter with another quote from Scripture: “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Matthew 4:7, quoting Deuteronomy 6:16). Between following the “Malafarian” pandemic religion—with support from the tempter—or hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd, it seems to make good sense “not to put the Lord your God to the test”.

To deny the real risks of a pandemic and to use faith to disrespect sanitary orientations which are given to avoid the virus’ proliferation indeed seems to be insane—and is not new in history. The alternative, to flee in sheer panic and especially to abandon those who need care and assistance, is also not new. Here, we could evoke Cyprian of Carthage (+258) as an example of denunciation against irresponsibility in dealing with sickness and health in Ancient Christianity. During “Cyprian’s plague” in the middle of the 3rd century AD, the Church Father writes his exhortation *De mortalitate* (253) to encourage the Christian community to remain strong in faith (Cyprian of Carthage 1996, [253]; Gonçalves 2020). While reminding believers of their heavenly home and hope, he states they are not exempt from the worldly sufferings. To the contrary, they have to be prepared to suffer more than others, “since he must struggle more with the attacks from the devil” (Cyprian of Carthage 1996, [253], nr. 9). In fact, such suffering, according to Cyprian, was announced by God:

With the exhortation of His fore-seeing word, instructing, and teaching, and preparing, and strengthening the people of His Church for all endurance of things to come, He predicted and said that wars, and famines, and earthquakes, and pestilences would arise in each place; and lest an unexpected and new dread of mischiefs should shake us, He previously warned us that adversity would increase more and more in the last times. (Cyprian of Carthage 1996, [253], nr. 2)

For Cyprian, Christians should look to Job, Tobias, Abraham (even prepared to sacrifice his own son, Genesis 22!) and Paul as examples of patient endurance, as well as use the opportunity to do good works:

And further, beloved brethren, what is it, what a great thing is it, how pertinent, how necessary, that pestilence and plague which seems horrible and deadly,

searches out the righteousness of each one, and examines the minds of the human race, to see whether they who are in health tend the sick; whether relations affectionately love their kindred; whether masters pity their languishing servants; whether physicians do not forsake the beseeching patients; whether the fierce suppress their violence; whether the rapacious can quench the ever insatiable ardour of their raging avarice even by the fear of death; whether the haughty bend their neck; whether the wicked soften their boldness; whether, when their dear ones perish, the rich, even then bestow anything, and give, when they are to die without heirs. (Cyprian of Carthage 1996, [253], nr. 16)

From Cyprian's position it becomes clear that Christians have a responsibility to their neighbour and must not abandon him or her for fear of death. The duty of caring comes before one's own life, and salvation in heaven is not detached from suffering on earth and the exercise of charity.

This Christian perception of the plague is considerably pre-dated by the description of chaos and abandonment caused by the plague in Athens (around 430 BCE) as narrated by Thucydides (460–397 BCE) in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Thucydides [431 BCE] 1998). As Villas Boas (2020, p. 4) highlights, Thucydides offers not so much a clinical, but a political interpretation of the disease: The epidemic plague revealed the “political plague of oligarchic greed”, but also created two specific major symptoms: *anomia* and *athimia*, the lack of order and responsibility and the lack of hope and resilience. In Thucydides, Villas Boas (2020, p. 5) argues,

[N]either the cause of the plague nor the anomie situation of society is divine [the plague was traditionally considered a divine punishment for humans' hybris, like in Homers *Iliad* (I, 59–67)] but results from the greed of a few and the lack of politicians who acted as doctors for their people.

While Thucydides thus “secularises” the plague, he insists on it as an issue of public health and political responsibility which also needs political unity. This can be corroborated by the use of the term “epidemic” in ancient Greece and also in early Christian authors, where it is a “political concept evoking a form of presence and leadership in people's lives, as well as involvement in civil wars [war ‘among the people’—*epi demos*], public reputation, and foreign relations” (Villas Boas 2020, p. 3), with no specific connection to disease. It was through Hippocrates' writings on *Epidemics* (*epidemiai*) that the term came to mean diseases present in a community (Fox 2020, p. 135) and, thus, with public and political implications and consequences.

Returning to the Christian Era, during a situation of close relationship between religion and politics, a wave of the bubonic plague arrived in the university city of Wittenberg in Germany in August 1527. The university was ordered to leave the city, but Luther and Bugenhagen stayed on to “minister to the sick and frightened people” (Luther [1527] 1968, p. 115; cf. Wachholz 2020). Luther's own house was transformed into a hospital. When Johann Hess, leader of the Reformation in Silesia, inquired Luther on behalf of the city's clergy whether it was correct for a Christian to flee from such lethal danger, he answered with the letter titled, “Whether one may flee from a deadly plague”. He emphasises the importance of political, family, religious and professional responsibility to care for the sick and, also, to avoid the proliferation of the plague. He states that those who hold such responsibility, namely politicians, physicians, pastors, police, city clerks, parents caring for children as well as sons and daughters caring for their parents, masters caring for their servants and servants caring for their masters, all these must not flee but stay, unless there are enough other persons who can exercise responsibility in their stead. Thus, they obey the commandment to love and serve their neighbour. For Luther, those who unduly flee out of fear and temptation by the devil, “fall into sin on the left hand”, as he says.

Others sin on the right hand. They are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the

plague, but lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. They say that it is God's punishment; if he wants to protect them he can do so without medicines or our carefulness. This is not trusting God, but tempting him. God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health. (Luther [1527] 1968, p. 131)

Luther compares this attitude to suicide, because it is similar to someone who would stop eating and drinking and say that if God wanted to save him, he could do so without food.

It is even more shameful for a person to pay no heed to his own body and to fail to protect it against the plague the best he is able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if he had taken care of his body as he should have. He is thus responsible before God for his neighbor's death and is a murderer many times over. (Luther [1527] 1968, p. 131)

Thus, for Luther, it is essential that humans know to make good use of medicine when caring for life. It is God the Creator who concedes wisdom and the capacity for the production of drugs to heal illnesses and to provide a better quality of life and counts on humans to be *cooperatores Dei* in the *creatio continua*. In this context, to trust in God means to ask for God's merciful protection and, at the same time, take care of the body, make use of the correct medication and follow the rules of public health:

You ought to think this way: 'Very well, by God's decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly offal. Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. (Luther [1527] 1968, p. 132)

This quote shows how Luther understood the way of proliferation of the plague: by air—taking up the theory of the toxic *miasma* ("breath of the plague"), whose agent was the devil. But he was apparently also aware of the doctrine of *contagium* ("illness substance") as he held it to be irresponsible if even only moderately sick people mixed with healthy ones; for him, this came near to murder (Riha 2014, p. 542). He clearly recognised the seriousness of the illness and its danger, while at the same time leaving no doubt about the responsibility given by God to humans to both avoid contagion and not leave the sick to themselves, echoing the longstanding Christian diaconal tradition of caring for the sick and the needy, even at risk for their own health and life.

Beyond the real plague, he could also use the term in a metaphorical sense, for instance in *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), while discussing the function of the diaconate, Luther denounces that "whoever, therefore, does not know or preach the Gospel, is not only not a priest or bishop, but he is a plague of the Church, who under the false title of priest or bishop—in sheep's clothing, forsooth—oppresses the Gospel and plays the wolf in the Church" (Luther [1520] 1959, pp. 7, 15).

Our argument for responsibility and against non-responsibility in view of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil is, thus, supported historically by Cyprian, Luther and Bonhoeffer. To defy validated science and the world's health authorities, to minimise the problem in the way of Malafaia and Santiago is to recur to a *deus ex machina*, as Bonhoeffer (2009, p. 366) would say, a God that appears out of nothing when He is deemed necessary to fill in the gaps—and dismissed once other solutions can do the job. Such a reductionist position is questionable both from a scientific and a faith point of view. In both dimensions it configures an irresponsible attitude.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer thinks of a Christianity that deals with the consequences and, in doing so, forms part of a responsible theological ethics focused on the concreteness of life. A Christian honours this title when he/she is in the world for others (Zeferino and von Sinner 2020), an element that may dialogue with the Barthian concept of *Mitmenschlichkeit* (fellow humanity) (Barth 1978; cf. Zeferino 2018). Being with and for the other summarises

a Christian ethics that arises from biblical perspectives as the one represented by the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36–40).

The famous question posed by Bonhoeffer about *Who is Christ for us today?* may be read as an interrogation for Christians before the other, *Who am I for my neighbour today?* Responding to it in Latin America requires a profound understanding and feeling of contextual sufferings. Often, the issue here is rather *Where is God?* than *Who is God?*—on the side of the suffering or of those forces that produce suffering (Sobrinho 2004, referring to Bonhoeffer; Sander 2006). It also means understanding reality in the flesh: My flesh, the others', and the world's (Kearney 2015). In Bonhoefferian terms it means incarnation or, as Jens Zimmermann (2019) would interpret it, an incarnational humanism. In this sense, becoming human is becoming human in the likeness of Jesus. Therefore, being for the others means an incarnated responsibility, solidarity and freedom in the concreteness of life, it means being present for the other right here, right now (Zimmermann and Gregor 2010). For this reason, the theologian must resist the temptation to classify what is good once and for all, but in the attentive hearing of the world, perceive that it is in the context of our confrontations and decisions that one is challenged to interpret how Jesus may take form for us here and today (Bonhoeffer 2006).

For Bonhoeffer, the church is the place to recognise guilt before Christ. In doing so, it becomes the place where Jesus takes form. By recognising and confessing blame before the other who suffers, the church may become a place of rebirth and renewal. This communitarian dimension of Christformation calls for a church responsibility in taking part in the form of Christ, as well as assuming its responsibility when it does not take that form. Therefore, when Christians side with unjust practices—with authoritarian political agenda, by diminishing other's quality of life, with irresponsible prosperity, by putting the other's life at risk—there is the possibility to repent and to confess, as the Church of Christ, that it has not been taking the form of Christ, which, in cases as Bonhoeffer's, may lead to martyrdom (Bonhoeffer 2006; Zeferino and von Sinner 2020).

Since the Brazilian theological and political context may depict the constant risk of authoritarian stances, exemplary fighters against totalitarianism such as Bonhoeffer may help us reflect theologically on Latin American issues. In accordance with Barth, another resistance landmark, by comprehending Christian ethics as being for and with the other in the likeness of Jesus, Bonhoeffer gives us some elements to think of an ethics that deals with consequences, a responsible ethics. Since the opposite term forms part of the whole phenomenon, we could characterise what we called pandemic religion as an irresponsible ethics, where *homo incurvatus in se* (Luther [1515] 2006) takes the lead even when disguised as men and women of God.

The confrontation between different modes of church emerges from these contradictory ethical stances. One does not want to be made accountable for their acts (cf. Ricoeur 1992), since it is selling out an ambiguity-free vision of the world. The other, by acknowledging that acts have consequences, takes up its responsibility and realises the constant necessity to revise practices and interpretations since it is the concreteness of life that provokes theological reflection. Self-critique, as Tracy (1981) explains it, is at the core of some prophetic religions, such as Judaism and Christianity. This critical moment within religions may be considered a classic that may ever again be revisited. Christian expressions that do not allow self-critique or self-revision lack responsibility with their own religious journeys, opting for some kind of reductionist absolutism such as *evangélico* fundamentalism (Zeferino and von Sinner 2019).

5. Conclusions

The image of a pandemic religion makes use of the metaphor of Christian expressions comprehended as a social disease spreading like a virus. This is based on the public impact of religion as it showed itself within the pandemic, unveiling how different churches respond to such a liminal situation. It becomes clear how some Christian ethical responses are not able to perceive today's scenario in all its drama and turn it into swift, resolute

and effective action for the other's benefit, which clashes directly with an ancient and long strand of Christian responsibility and love for the other. On the contrary, religious symbols and beliefs are instrumentalised for an ambiguity-free prosperity theology that is profoundly connected to a confluence of moralistic while prosperity focused and neoliberal religious, political, and economic perspectives (Zeferino and de Andrade 2020; Py 2020). This kind of "theology from above" does not recognise the complexity of human and social relationships, nor the deep suffering under the COVID-19 pandemic and the renewed poverty and inequality it brings with it. Even when applying an immanentist eschatology, it only looks for glory, not martyrdom (cf. Westhelle 2006; Zeferino et al. 2020).

In eschatological terms—an element that may be highlighted as a common emphasis but in quite different approaches in Latin American theologies (von Sinner 2021)—the lack of a responsible theology of the cross and consequent responsible ethics points to a reductionist understanding of Christian faith that leads believers into a bargain relationship with God. Indeed, the lack of accountability is symptomatic in the provision of offered religious products with doubtful return. Financial sacrifice becomes a mechanism to achieve good life, prosperity and happiness (Esperandio 2006). The attempt to keep looking for religious and political hegemonic power in the face of the coronavirus pandemic made use of this ambiguity-free logic in which the virus is undervalued, put in a manicheistic logic of good vs. evil, and confronted with spiritual rather than scientific resources. The scenes previously presented reinforce this understanding by demonstrating that what matters for some religious groups is the access to the temples, rather than safe social isolation; the amalgamation of politics and Christianity in the attempt to show popular support by using Christian symbols; and the instrumentalisation of a kind of faith that may count on magical solutions.

These exclusivist and authoritarian (cf. Barros 2019) approaches to faith, in the coronavirus pandemic, led not only to unhealthy but also insane reactions to the virus. As several studies have shown, the problem is wider than sanitary, it is religious, political and ethical (Barsalini et al. 2020; Carneiro et al. 2020; Pilla and von Sinner 2020; Villas Boas 2020). This is why only an interdisciplinary approach may help find ways to think about the problem in its integrality to try to construct responsible responses to it. One first outcome would be to acknowledge that this pandemic religion's theological background precedes the coronavirus and will probably accompany us when it is overcome. A second result may draw from what Ricoeur (2006) calls a moral debt with the victims, an aspect that may, through theoretical responses, be pitted against reductionist retributive theologies, and in practical-ethical-juridical initiatives where perpetrators must account for their acts, considering that theological delusions have a real impact on life when believers are misled into sickness and death.

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Notes

- ¹ A medicine against Malaria that was largely used to treat or to prevent COVID-19 even without consistent scientific support for its efficacy (see Brazão et al. 2021).
- ² The term is also being used—however, in a much narrower sense—by a group of scholars at George Mason University in a project that seeks to archive different responses from religious communities regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. See *pandemicreligion.org*.

Another similar term—post-pandemic religion—is being used to reflect on what might seem to be the scenario after the COVID-19 pandemic (Wildman and Sosis 2021).

- 3 The term *evangélico* generically designates a complex group that includes the historical Protestant immigrants and their descendants, such as Lutherans and Anglicans, and covers the so-called Protestantism of mission represented by Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians, as well as encompasses the range of churches that emerged after the rise of Pentecostalism in the Brazilian context. Thus, when we use *evangélico* in relation to the Brazilian political scenario, it refers especially to leaders from Pentecostal churches that mingle with politics—be they politicians in a formal sense or not—but it also includes, to different extents, representatives of all *evangélico* sectors.

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