



From Religious Populism to Civil Religion: a Discourse Analysis of Bolsonaro's and Lula's Inaugural and Victory Speeches

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Abstract

Religion played a major role during the presidential elections in Brazil in 2018 and 2022. Although much has been written about Bolsonaro's religious influence on Brazilian politics, there is a need to understand how politicians on other sides of the political spectrum have positioned themselves in regard to religion. Thus, through transdisciplinary research rooted in Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) explanation phase, this article seeks to assess both Bolsonaro's and Lula's victory and inauguration speeches and their intricacies that appeal to various sorts of politicized religion by problematizing contrasting meanings in discourses of these Brazilian leaders and exploring how social circumstances have enabled or provided conditions for the reproduction of power relations between these politicians and the realm of religion, primarily Christianity. Hence, the article questions: First, which forms of political religion are expressed in the two presidents' victory speeches and inauguration speeches in the aftermath of the last two general elections? Second, in what ways have both presidents been contributing to the politicization of religion and to what degree do Lula and Bolsonaro differ in this regard? It concludes by arguing that although Bolsonaro's exclusionary religious populism can be contrasted to Lula's inclusionary civil religion, there are also some important similarities in their discourses as both politicize Brazilian religion.

Keywords Discourse analysis · Secularism · Political religion · Brazilian Christianity · Populism

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Resumo

A religião desempenhou um papel importante durante as eleições presidenciais no Brasil em 2018 e 2022. Embora muito se tenha escrito sobre a influência religiosa de Bolsonaro na política brasileira, é preciso entender também como candidatos de outros espectros políticos têm se posicionado a esse respeito. Assim, por meio de uma pesquisa transdisciplinar fundamentada na fase de explanação da Análise Crítica do Discurso (ACD) de Fairclough, este artigo procura avaliar os discursos de vitória e posse de Bolsonaro e de Lula e suas complexas relações com a politização da religião ao problematizar significados contrastantes nos discursos desses líderes brasileiros e ao expor como circunstâncias sociais possibilitaram ou forneceram condições para a reprodução das relações de poder entre políticos e o reino da religião, principalmente do cristianismo. Assim, o artigo busca responder às seguintes questões: de que forma ambos os presidentes têm contribuído para a politização da religião? Quais formas de religião política foram expressas nos discursos de vitória e de posse dos dois presidentes após as duas últimas eleições presidenciais e até que ponto Lula e Bolsonaro divergem nesse quesito? Em conclusão, o artigo defende que embora o populismo religioso excludente de Bolsonaro possa ser contrastado com a religião civil inclusiva de Lula, há também algumas semelhanças importantes em seus discursos, pois ambos politizam a religião brasileira.

Palavras-chave Análise crítica do discurso · Secularismo · religião política · cristianismo brasileiro · populismo

Introduction

In October 2022, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva won the second round of Brazil’s presidential elections against the ruling president Jair Messias Bolsonaro by a small margin. Lula had won two former presidential elections, first in 2002 and then his re-election in 2006. In some of the international media coverage of the elections, there was a notable tendency to emphasize the religious dimension of Bolsonaro’s presidency and his electoral campaign without noting how Lula, his primary adversary in this campaign, also resorted to certain religious arguments.¹ Given the more secular tone of Lula’s discourse when he was in office from 2003, this impression is understandable. Nevertheless, when significant examples of the two candidate’s political discourse are considered, the widespread assumption that the religious rightist Bolsonaro competed against the secular leftist Lula can be challenged and questioned. This becomes particularly evident when the victory speeches and the inauguration speeches of Bolsonaro and Lula are laid side by side and compared.

¹ See for instance Milhorange, Flávia. “Brazil’s disputed runoff faces ‘spiritual warfare’ for evangelical voters.” *New York Times* 30.10.22, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/30/world/americas/brazil-elect-ion-evangelicals.html>. See also Bedinelli, Talita and Javier Lafuente. “Los evangélicos se convierten a Bolsonaro.” *El País* 08.10.22, https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/10/07/america/1538930780_735803.html.

During the last decades Brazil has witnessed a religious transformation with the rise of Evangelicals. Although it is still recognized as the country with the world's largest Catholic population, Brazil's religious landscape has been rapidly shifting toward Protestantism, primarily in various Pentecostal forms and orientations. New Evangelical churches have been founded in nearly all districts in Brazil. Between 1970 and 1990, Evangelical places of worship grew more than 16 times, from 1049 to 17,033 churches. Research suggests that between 1920 and 2019, the major growth of Evangelical churches took place between 2000 and 2016 (Araújo 2023). By 2019, Brazil had nearly 110,000 churches and 31% reported in a study by the Brazilian agency Datafolha that they identified themselves as Evangelical Christians.² This change in religious demography has made Evangelical churches into more influential arenas for socialization in general and therefore the shaping of political attitudes in particular.

The rise of Evangelicals in Brazil has manifested the increased willingness of this religious group to participate in the electoral process. This took place within the confines of the legislative due process of law, but still evokes pre-enlightenment sentiments of an undue and deeper than constitutionally accepted link between religion and the state (Camurça 2020, 90).

The degree of politicization in these diverse religious congregations vary to a high degree and Evangelical voters cannot be reduced to one uniform group within the Brazilian electorate. Nonetheless, the high number of Evangelical voters has increased the political significance of this religious group for Brazilian candidates who aim at winning elections. Politics has penetrated some of these churches and many pastors have become political influencers, exerting power and influence over followers in exchange for political power and influence over the official holders of power within the republican establishment (Casarões 2020; Trevisan 2013). The number of Federal Representatives that are publicly self-declared Evangelicals has increased in every election (Abreu and Cunha 2022), although Evangelical politicians suffered a considerable backlash in the 2006 elections due to their involvement in corruption scandals (Reich and dos Santos 2013). Ministers of state and even a judge of the Supreme Court have been selected based on their Evangelical faith and religious activism (Vital 2021). President Jair Bolsonaro's nomination and the Brazilian senate's formal recognition of the Evangelical lawyer André Luiz de Almeida Mendonça as a new judge in the Supreme Court in December 2021 may be considered the culmination of the effective political alliance between the rightist president and the Evangelical caucus in the Brazilian Congress (Oro 2022, 304). This Evangelical presence in Brazilian politics stands out in a regional context. Compared to the Evangelical political influence in other Latin American countries, the Brazilian Evangelical politicians have been particularly successful in terms of shaping national and local politics and in terms of nominal representation. As a recent monograph

² No data on religious adherence has so far been published from IBGE as result of the national census from 2022. The range of the Datafolha report was limited as it was based on 2,948 informants. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/01/cara-tipica-do-evangelico-brasileiro-e-feminina-e-negra-aponta-datafolha.shtml>

explains, this Evangelical power can be regarded as a result of a Catholic reaction in the early twentieth century against the disestablishment in the secularist constitution. The Catholic church mobilized in Brazil in various ways and through different channels to recoup privileges throughout the twentieth century. Against this historical background, Brazilian Evangelicals felt more threatened as a minority and mobilized politically as part of their response in the 1980s (Boas 2023). Compared to countries with significant Evangelical populations, such as Chile and Peru, the Evangelicals in Brazil have politicized their religious identity in stronger ways, as can be seen in today's religiously informed political discourse.

That said, the religious influence on Brazilian politics cannot be reduced to Evangelical initiatives and mobilization. When Bolsonaro went as far as to sanction a federal act that established the first Sunday of the month of June as the "national Christian day" (Federal Act 14.419, 2022) he could do so with appeal to a common Christian culture upheld by a religious majority, consisting of primarily adherents to the Roman Catholic church on one hand, and a plurality of less centralized and coordinated Evangelical churches on the other. Among the different justifications for this act, its proponents (members of Congress which supported Bolsonaro) stated that Christian moral and ethical values are of utmost importance in the country's Constitution (Federal Bill 2021). They could legitimize this act based on common assumptions and causes among major Catholic and Evangelical groups. Hence, they could appeal to one of the religious groups by speaking of the so-called Christian or conservative values without losing support from the other.³

Brazil's secularist tradition dates at least back to its 1891 Constitution, which constituted a major historical rupture with the Constitution of 1824 that had adopted Roman Apostolic Catholicism as the official religion. Brazil may be labeled a passive secularist state (Løland 2020, 66). But this secularism also protects religious communities against interference from the state and accordingly secures the religious freedom that may, partly, be expressed through religious activism in society. Political discourse in Brazil is, in part, currently formed by religious factors, also due to the high religious activity and reported religious beliefs of the electorate. Research suggests that the vast majority of the Brazilian population believes in God or some sort of deity. According to a 26-country survey from 2023 published by the Ipsos Institute, 89% of Brazilians say they believe in God or some sort of a higher divine force; out the 26 included countries, Brazil has the highest percentage of reported religious beliefs (IPSOS 2023).

Through transdisciplinary research rooted in Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) explanation phase, we will assess both Bolsonaro's and Lula's victory and inauguration speeches and their intricacies with various sorts of politicized religion. More explicitly, this article seeks to problematize, through a critical approach, contrasting meanings in discourses of these Brazilian leaders, focusing on the entanglement of politics and religion, and reconciling the discourse under

³ By "conservative," we mean a slogan for legitimizing political campaigns against decriminalization of abortion, legal recognition of same-sex marriage and policies against homophobia without determining whether the political values guiding these campaigns reflect a true or actual conservatism.

analysis with its social circumstances. Accordingly, these research questions are aimed at exploring how social circumstances have enabled or provided conditions for the reproduction of power relations between incumbents and the realm of religion, primarily Christianity. As proposed by Fairclough (1989), we aim at unveiling social determinants, ideologies, and effects at the situational, institutional, and societal levels. First, we ask which forms of political religion are expressed in the two presidents' victory speeches and inauguration speeches in the aftermath of the last two general elections? Second, in what ways have both presidents been contributing to the politicization of religion and to what degree do Lula and Bolsonaro differ in this regard?

To answer these questions, our sample consists of four texts:

- Bolsonaro's victory speech (October 2018)⁴
- Bolsonaro's inaugural speech (January 2019)⁵
- Lula's victory speeches (October 2022)⁶
- Lula's inaugural speeches (January 2023)⁷

There are several reasons as to why these speeches in the events of electoral victory and presidential inauguration are particularly relevant for providing answers to these questions. While many take for granted that modern politics has been entirely secularized, speeches that mark political transitions often attest the opposite. Political transitions call for an unquestioned allegiance to the dominant order by the person elected. The speech constructs a horizon that tends to activate the memory of the past as well as pointing to the future of the political community which orchestrates its own being in the time of transition. It evokes a sense of eternity in these moments of political density and in this way the ceremonial speech tends to transcend the regular and the mundane and point to a theological-political realm that is beyond the tangible present. In this ritual space, the ceremonial political speeches often evoke religious ideas. Political rituals, their particular actions and typical discourses, can even be regarded as paradigmatic examples of sacralization of politics (Souroujon 2014, 128). This sacralization is not a "mere ritual" as if the ritual was empty of effective political meaning that politics can do without. Far from it, politics relies upon this construction of the sacred that is being expressed in manners such as, for example, the act of acclamation. Acclamation appears unavoidable for political orders. In the words of Giorgio Agamben, "the profane acclamations are not an ornament of political power but found and justify it" (Agamben 2011, 230). An inherent dimension to this sacralization, that calls for specific actions and

⁴ <https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2018/noticia/2018/10/28/integra-discurso-de-jair-bolsonaro-apos-vitoria-eleitoral.ghtml>

⁵ <https://gauchazh.clicrbs.com.br/politica/noticia/2019/01/leia-a-integra-do-discurso-de-posse-de-bolsonaro-no-congresso-cjqe2ntl10org01rx39u8y3z7.html>

⁶ <https://g1.globo.com/politica/eleicoes/2022/noticia/2022/10/31/leia-e-veja-a-integra-dos-discursos-de-lula-apos-vitoria-nas-eleicoes.ghtml>

⁷ <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2023/01/01/posse-lula-discursos-congresso-plano-integra.htm>

words in times of transition, is affective. Political rituals capture particularly emotional moments in politics. This emotional purpose of the ceremonial speech also reflects some of the mobilizing effects that religion may have on politics. Politicians can mobilize religious citizens to commit to political attitudes and beliefs. Religious ideas do not speak as much to the rational and cognitive side of the citizen as they speak affectively to the emotional aspect of the persons. In other words, we do not expect religion to objectively inform political arguments in these speeches. We rather assume that religion can contribute to a sense of moral and social unity in decisive moments of transition between periods and epochs.

In a sense, the political ritual is an “absolute” expression of the political. It functions in a way as the ultimate mirror for a political community that is at its most religious. Hence, some historical and political contexts are less marked by religion than others. In Brazil, it seems that the religious dimension has become more central over the last decades.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis

Drawing upon Norman Fairclough’s conception of CDA, we assess, from a critical theory perspective, both Bolsonaro’s and Lula’s victory and inauguration speeches and the ways in which they resort to religion or religious faith for political purposes. CDA is a social theory with methodological elements. As a theory, it aims at revealing the playing field of discourse in the social sphere and, at the same time, describing the process for such analysis to take place. It relies upon the hypothesis that common sense assumptions are implicit in linguistic conventions and not usually subject to conscious awareness. Whether or not common sense may be found in discourse as a result of intentional act, CDA assumes that they are the place of identification of the ideological aspects of a given discourse. Since we live in a linguistic epoch, the exercise of power happens through the linguistic exercise of ideology (Fairclough 1989, 2).

A relevant aspect of CDA for this study is that it focuses on analyzing discourse understood as an element or moment of the political and social, which is dialectically related to other moments or elements. It is transdisciplinary within critical social research and inclined to critical realism, focusing on the analysis of discourse and its relations with the material elements of social life (rather than focusing only on discourse and text), such as institutions, ideology, and social identities (Fairclough 2013).

For our purpose, perhaps, the most relevant aspects of CDA are its nature of the following: (a) normative critique—in the sense that it does not merely describe realities, but rather assesses the extent “to which they match up to values that are taken (contentiously) to be fundamental for just or decent societies (e.g., certain requisites for human well-being)”; and (b) explanatory critique—in the sense that it seeks to explain such realities as effects of power structures, ideologies, mechanisms, or forces, in other words, that the realities being explained are “conceptually mediated”

by representations, conceptualizations, theories, mindsets, and worldviews (Fairclough 2013).

The associations between discourse and ideology, power and hegemony put discourse within the category of social action. As such, the social conditions in which a discourse is given have two main influences over discourse: they determine the properties of a given discourse and the processes to produce and interpret discourses, which are formatted by and within social conditions, therefore constituting social conventions. The dialectic nature between discourse and the social conditions in which it is given is unavoidable: there is a social determination in every discourse and, concomitantly, a discursive determination in society (Fairclough 1989, 24).

CDA methodology involves the assessment of three different discursive instances: description, interpretation, and explanation of discourse. Description involves the formal properties of the text, identification, and categorization of its terms. Interpretation is a cognitive process that conceives text as the result of production and as a resource of interpretation itself. Explanation analyses the transitory social events and the more durable social structures that format and are formatted by discourse (Fairclough 1989, 26; Mezzanotti 2020). Given that the political discourses analyzed here include multiple objects, recipients, and topics, we shall focus on the “explanation” aspect of CDA, primarily due to the complexity within the material elements of social circumstances of the elections and religious movements. In other words, we deem it to be more complex, therefore more convenient and revealing, to focus on establishing the intricacies between the material social factors at play (mostly the religion-based social movements and struggles for power within politics) than on the textual nature of the analyzed discourses.

The consequence of such an option is that, when analyzing discourses, we shall focus on what Foucault called “orders of discourse” (Foucault 1972), which was brought into CDA by Fairclough as a representation of the social conditions that determine discourse (Mezzanotti 2020). Foucault’s assumption is that social actions are formatted by social conventions and that discourse, as a social action, is subject to this same constriction, which appears in the common sense “hidden assumptions of discourse.” According to Fairclough (1989), the hidden assumptions of discourse are expressions of ideology. Discourse is, therefore, manifestation of power, political statements that determine the discursive nature of social and political changes. As discourse is a manifestation of the linguistic determination of power, one shall conceive power not solely in its negative connotation (oppression, exclusion, censorship, abstraction, etc.), but also in its constitutional, commissive nature (power also produces domains of objects and rituals of truth) (Foucault 1977, 194).

CDA assumes an intrinsic nature of the orders of discourse in that they are formatted and constituted by relations of power. The field of forces that shape discourse is made of power relations that are intrinsic to discourse itself. The object of CDA is, therefore, the exploration of linguistic conventions as products of relations of power and/or power struggles. Discourse is assumed to both incorporate and precede forms of power. Its main goal is to sustain or acquire structures of power in the realm of the order of discourse (Fairclough 1989).

When focusing on the explanation phase of CDA, we portray the analyzed discourses as a part of social processes, circumstances, and structures of power. We

seek to determine how such discourses reflect orders of discourses and, above all, how they seek to reproduce desired effects on the orders of discourse. This goal is achievable by assessing the following: (a) social determinants (what power relations at situational, institutional, and societal levels help shape this discourse?); (b) ideologies (what discourse elements that are drawn upon have an ideological character?); and (c) effects (how is this discourse positioned in relation to struggles at the situational, institutional, and societal levels?) (Fairclough 1989, 166).

Political Religion: Religious Populism and Civil Religion

Sacralization of politics through discourse with explicit reference to religious concepts, metaphors, and narratives can take many forms. In a broad sense, political religion comes to expression in the everchanging intersections and connections between political life and religious traditions of various kinds (de Vries 2006, 25). Here we focus on two forms of political religion. We suggest that one particularly relevant form of political religion for our purposes can be labeled “religious populism,” whereas the second type of political religion of high relevance in this context may be categorized as “civil religion.”

Religious populism can be seen as a particular form of politicization of religion by populist leaders or groups that “openly profess a transcendent interpretation of human reality” (Zúquete 2017, 446). Based more on an ideational framework (Kaltwasser and Mudde 2013, 498) than a strategic approach to populism (Weyland 2017), we suggest that religious populism is founded on a discursive construction of two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: a people that stands in a beneficial relation to the divine and an elite as its enemy in a cosmological conflict. In other words, the fundamental narrative of a conflict that drives political populisms is in religious populisms extended to a supernatural deity that the political sphere relates to or even depends upon. With Rogers Brubaker (2017, 360), one could say that with religious ideas the religious populist expands his or her discursive repertoire in cultural contexts where there is a beneficial resonance for religious elements. Populists invest heavily in the concept of the people in a rhetorical sense and religious populists emphasize the authenticity or virtuous qualities of the “true people” by reference to religion. The “true people” imagined by the populist may embody God’s will with its moral virtues without any necessary connection to a particular religious tradition or it may be defined by confessional lines in the sense of belonging to one specific religion or tradition within a religion. It can be inclusionary or exclusionary with regard to a specific religious identity. Whatever form it takes, antipluralism is always an aspect to this populism in the sense that the populist implicitly or explicitly claims to know the one and univocal will of the people. In this sense religious populism does not only attempt to conquer the political, but its attempts to discursively monopolize the general will of the people with religious ideas that also affect the religious sphere since this type of populist is also making truth-claims about religion, always in tension with the religious views of adherents to religious traditions and its leaders. Religious leaders with dissenting views from the populist may therefore always be constructed as aligned with the political enemy. In this way, the

typical populist antielitism can be filled with religious meaning, either by accusing certain religious leaders of betraying their own religion and being hypocrites or by accusing non-religious persons and groups of pertaining to a godless elite that is not truly part of the people since it does not share the true people's religion. This paves the way for the typical demonization of political opponents on the populist's part. This demonization can reach another level of discursive effectiveness in religious populisms given that this type of populism is based on the common assumption of the existence of a supernatural realm with supernatural beings or spiritual forces such as angels and demons, God, and the devil. Finally, religious populism can be understood as "a thin-centered ideology" (Kaltwasser and Mudde 2013, 498) but one that compensates for its thinness with certain normative sets of religious ideas as its host ideologies. As host ideology, this religious nucleus of concepts can fill populism with more ideological content but also make it more politically effective. In sum, what are commonly assumed as the central ideas of any populism—the people, the elite, and the general will (Kaltwasser and Mudde 2013, 498)—are filled with religious meaning and resonance in religious populism.

Civil religion is a concept from the classic work *The Social Contract* (1762) written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in which a form of civil catechism or profession of faith is required of all citizens as a sort of religious minimum for the functioning of the state. While the consistency of Rousseau's concept of civil religion remains a matter of debate in contemporary political philosophy (Bernstein 2013; Critchley 2013),⁸ the concept has proven to be fruitful for analyses of actual expressions of political religion in ways that the sociologist Robert Bellah paved the way for with his classic article "Civil Religion in America" from 1967. While Bellah applied the concept in the context of the USA and not in Brazil, there are some similarities between the roles of religion in the two countries that could indicate some relevance of the concept in Brazil. Both in the USA and in Brazil, the Christian religion is dominant, despite both nations' creed that their constitutions have committed themselves to the principle of disestablishment and freedom of religion. Accordingly, privileging any particular religious confession is by definition unconstitutional. Both countries can be regarded as passive democratic secularist states, in contrast to the more active French counterpart (Kuru 2007). Furthermore, religion is, to comparable degrees, flourishing in multiple forms in the two countries. It is not without reason that Brazil is considered one of the core areas of the new dynamic in global Christianity (Horsford et al. 2022).

In Bellah's view, civil religion comes to expression in spite of the apparent irrelevancy of religion in secular politics. Although religious ideas may have limited

⁸ One of the focal points of this debate was Simon Critchley's call for a return to Rousseau's civil religion: "The exemplarity of Rousseau, to my mind, consists in the fact that he gives us the definitive expression of the modern conception of politics: that is, politics is the break with any conception of nature and natural law and has to be based in the concepts of popular sovereignty, free association, rigorous equality, and collective autonomy understood as the self-determination of a people. And yet, in order for this modern conception of politics to become effective it has to have a religious dimension, a moment of what the Romans used to call *theologia civilis*, civil theology." Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in political theology* (London: Verso, 2012), 24.

impact on actual political decision-making, politics still can be inspired and justified by deep religious convictions. In tune with the constitutional impossibility of an official state religion of a particular confession, civil religion is consistently non-confessional in the sense of not being limited to a specific religious tradition or denomination (Bellah 1967). It is not even defined as Christian, although its main elements in countries like the USA or Brazil are recognizably Christian. This underscores the inclusive function of civil religion. Although it refers to a deity or religious convictions, these references are so vague and all-encompassing that even non-Christians may accept them. This civil religion thrives in political contexts where secularism is not enforced militantly or where anticlerical sentiments are marginal. In this way, civil religion is able to mobilize deep personal convictions for national values and political ideals. It is civil, since it is professed for the sake of the political and not primarily for the religious sphere.

The religious content in what we distill as a Brazilian civil religion is small, not unlike Rousseau's four relatively simple precepts or "dogmas" in *The Social Contract*. When exploring Lula's discourse some of these fundamental characteristics of the Brazilian civil religion will be laid bare.

Analysis

Circumstances of the Discourses

"We, representatives of the Brazilian people, united in a National Constitutive Assembly with the purpose of establishing a democratic state, destined to ensure social and individual rights, freedom and security, welfare, development, equality and justice as supreme values of a fraternal society, plural and free from prejudice, founded on social harmony and committed, internal and internationally, to peaceful solution of conflicts, promulgate, *under the protection of God*, this Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil" (our emphasis).⁹ This is the preamble of the Constitution of Brazil, promulgated in 1988 after a period of a dictatorial military regime. Despite evoking the "protection of God" in its preamble, the same Constitution, article 19, expressly forbids federal, state or municipal governments to establish religious cults or churches, to associate with or fund them, nor to create obstacles for their developments. Article 19 also prohibits governments of all spheres to establish links with churches or religions, whether inter-dependency relationships or alliances. The same Constitution, article 5, VI, protects freedom of religion and of association.

Brazilian Supreme Court has upheld the state's secularity on a number of cases since the promulgation of the Constitution, including high profile disputes that had the Catholic Church as *amicus curiae* and naturally defending a religious stance, involving the protection of research with embryonic stem cells, authorized abortion in cases of anencephaly and same-sex civil unions (Galindo 2021). Moreover,

⁹ The authors' translation of the preamble of the 1988 Constitution.

during the Covid-19 pandemic, the courts ruled against Jair Bolsonaro's decree that defined churches as "essential services" in order to hold them open in spite of the contagious virus (Bandeira and Carranza 2020). The high activity level within the Supreme Court on issues that are contested by religiously based arguments suggests that although the state is defined as secular, Brazilian politics are not secularized. Far from it, the Brazilian public square can be regarded as being in a process of desecularization rather than a secularizing liquidation of religious ideas and arguments. When the newly elected president Fernando Henrique Cardoso took the oath of office on January 1, 1995, he held an inauguration speech without one single reference to God or any divine being. What is more, religion was not in any sense an issue in the speech. Instead, secular concerns such as the struggle for democracy and taming of inflation were pivotal in Cardoso's discourse (Cardoso 1999). After his electoral victory in 2002, Lula became Cardoso's successor. Along the same lines as Cardoso, secular topics occupied Lula's inauguration speech on January 1, 2003. There was, however, a notable difference with his predecessor at the end of Lula's speech when Lula gave thanks to God for his trajectory ("*por chegar até aonde cheguei*") and prayed to God for wisdom to govern Brazil (Lula da Silva 2003).

We have, however, witnessed an escalation of religious motifs within politics since Lula's victory in 2002. When Lula was first elected president in 2002, candidates fought to gain Evangelical support until the last minute.¹⁰ The "Letter to Evangelicals" written by the Lula campaigners during the 2002 campaign reveals an effort of reaching out to Evangelical groups and gaining their votes. Nonetheless, there is a notable hesitance to embrace explicit Evangelical causes or resort to a religious rhetoric in order to convince this religious group to vote for Lula's candidacy. The letter emphasizes values such as justice, decency, honesty, and fraternity as common values. Aside from declaring himself a Christian and a believer in the Christian faith, Lula's letter appeals to a close link between his political program and the Evangelicals' faith by stating that "we are together fighting for the same causes."¹¹ The letter also conveys that there is already an ongoing partnership between the Worker's Party and Evangelicals in the jurisdictions that are already managed by members of the party: "I am happy for the common experience of our administrations and Evangelicals. We are real partners in the building of our country, through projects for social promotion, education, health, care, and support for the marginalized, (the promotion of) events on safety and peace." Lula thanks for the prayers and Christian love that his party has been receiving from Evangelicals. Even though the majority of Evangelicals voted for Antony Garotinho, a candidate that did not make it to the second round, it is estimated that approximately 60% of Evangelicals voted for Lula in the second round of the 2002 election (Bohn 2007, 2011).

¹⁰ <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/area/pais/lula-e-vitima-da-cultura-do-medo-disse-malafaia-em-2002/>;

<https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/brasil/ult96u40567.shtml>

¹¹ The translations of formulations of the letter are the authors'. The formulations are found in Bohn (2007).

As we jump to the 2018 campaign, which led to Bolsonaro's victory, a strikingly different type of discourse and role of religion in politics became evident. The country was witnessing severe corruption cases in the court system associated with the left and secular political institutions in Brazil went through a deep crisis caused by a loss of public credibility. With increased mistrust the political space was opened for outsiders, including those who knew how to capitalize on religion. As opposed to 2002, when Brazil was experiencing economic growth and Lula's government was able to couple social justice with good economic momentum, the playing field for the 2018 presidential election was marked by economic crises, demoralization of the left and the popularity of neo-conservative agendas. Bolsonaro could launch his rhetorical attacks against "political correctness," LGBTQ+ rights, the so-called gender ideology in the classroom environment and progressive agendas in general.

Bolsonaro's administration (2018–2022) was impregnated by the religious motto "God above everything and Brasil above everyone," coupled with sentiments of anti-institutionalism, anti-intellectuality, and an orientation to reach the masses with despise of science. This rhetoric effectively left more space open for religious arguments in Brazilian politics.

Several Evangelicals were appointed by Bolsonaro as Ministers of State, such as the Human Rights Minister (Damares Alves) and Education Minister (Abraham Weintraub). Rede Record, a TV channel owned by the Evangelical leader Edir Macedo, was interestingly given special access to interviews with Bolsonaro (Lapper 2021, 166) and functioned as the semi-official media outlet for the government (Demuru 2021, 274).

The anti-establishment approach by Bolsonaro reached a "messianic tone," according to Demuru (2021), mainly due to his widespread use of conspiracy theories (both during campaign and his term as President), high digital activity on social media, but above all due to his discourse linking his figure with that of a "Messiah" (his name is Jair Messias Bolsonaro and "Messias" is the Portuguese word for "Messiah"). There are many examples of this rhetorical practice: in 2019, he published on his Facebook page a message from a Congolese pastor who referred to him as "Messiah." In his 2020 Easter message, he associated the attempt on his life during his campaign with Christ's resurrection. In his speech to the United Nations in 2020, Bolsonaro presented himself as a fighter against a new phenomenon which he nominated as "Christophobia." A month later, he posted a picture of a church on fire in Chile during protests and included a note that there is a global persecution of Christians and that "churches are being burnt by leftists" (Demuru 2021, 275). Bolsonaro's 2022 campaign kept the same motto "God above everything and Brazil above everyone," with consistent caricatures of Lula aimed at portraying the center-leftist as a thief due to the corruption charges that were later annulled by the Supreme Court. Interestingly, the idea of Lula as a sort of biblical proto-type of a criminal surged in certain Evangelical environments during the campaign. In some of the most politicized churches, the election between Bolsonaro and Lula was depicted as

a choice between Bolsonaro and Barabbas, the criminal crucified together with Jesus in the four Gospels.¹²

In this political climate, outright disinformation about Lula's political program as one that intended to close churches in Brazil circulated in social media, as if to suggest that Lula was a militant secularist ready to violate the human right of religious freedom. In the Letter to the Evangelicals that the Lula campaign published on October 19, 2022, the topic was addressed. The letter also touched upon aspects that his previous address to Evangelicals, back in 2002, did not include. Lula felt compelled to use large parts of the letter to remind Evangelical voters that he as president had protected the right to free exercise of religion, even including that it was under his government that the Evangelical churches prospered the most.¹³ He called for a stronger union among Brazilians through arguing that the attempts to divide people through politics only served to distance them from the message of the gospel that preached peace. Lula quoted Jesus' words from the Gospel of Matthew: "Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:21, NRSVUV). Without choosing words such as "secular" or "secularist," Lula seemed to argue biblically for a stronger division between religion and politics among Evangelicals. In fact, he resorted to the loaded term "separation" as he called for respect for laws and traditions that separate church and state (*"respeitando as leis e as tradições que separam o Estado da Igreja"*). Nevertheless, the purpose of this separation in Lula's letter was telling. In Lula's vision, the separation was needed to protect religion from political interference, and not the other way around (*"para que não haja interferência política na prática da fé"*).

In the same letter, Lula claimed that Brazil went through "a period in which lies become used intensively with the purpose of provoking fear in persons of good faith" (*"um período em que mentiras passaram a ser usadas intensamente com o objetivo de provocar medo nas pessoas de boa fé"*). The lies Lula referred to could be many, but there was one powerful religious idea about Lula's candidacy that was in his interest of combatting in this political outreach to a religious group: the accusation that he and his political party was possessed by demons. At a mass rally in July the same year Brazil's First Lady Michelle Bolsonaro had proclaimed that the seat of the Brazilian government before was "consecrated to demons" whereas with Jair Bolsonaro, it became "consecrated to the Lord."¹⁴ She presented a stark and dualistic vision of the political alternatives Brazilian Christians had to confront in the election: one between demons and God, evil, and good. Whereas Jair Bolsonaro had been hesitant during his 2018 campaign to claim explicitly that he was chosen by God to be Brazil's president, a close ally to him nonetheless proclaimed it. Bolsonaro chose the Pentecostal church in Rio de Janeiro led by pastor Silas Malafaia

¹² As one Evangelical pastor preached during the campaign: "Entre Barrabás e Jair, nós escolhemos Jair." <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2022/10/pastores-pro-bolsonaro-querem-fiscais-do-mito-para-mobilizar-evangelicos-no-nordeste.shtml>

¹³ <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2022/10/lula-lanca-carta-aos-evangelicos-e-rechaca-aborto-banheiro-unissex-e-pastor-que-mente.shtml>

¹⁴ The speech can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAKBvOMVOR8>

as the venue for his first public appearance as newly elected president of Brazil and in the event Malafaia claimed that God himself had chosen Bolsonaro. In the mass rally with Michelle Bolsonaro 4 years later, this division of labor was repeated. Just as Bolsonaro had stood silently on the scene listening to pastor Malafaia, this time Bolsonaro stood on another scene listening to another Evangelical: his Evangelical (Baptist) wife Michelle Bolsonaro. Once again, he let another profiled Evangelical confess publicly that he was chosen by no other than God. As Michelle Bolsonaro confessed: “He is elected by God” (“*Ele é eleito de Deus*”).

Some weeks later, the First Lady made another influential political move.¹⁵ Michelle Bolsonaro reposted the politician Sonaira Fernandes’ Instagram video showing Lula’s participation in a Afro-Brazilian Candomble ritual with its remark about Lula stating that “Lula sold his soul to win this election” (“*entregou sua alma para vencer essa eleição*”), as if participating in a Candomble ritual meant that Lula had sold his soul, assumedly to evil spirits or demons (as Afro-Brazilians spirits are seen by certain Evangelical segments and leaders). Michelle Bolsonaro commented on Fernandes’ video with the words, “So he can do this, but I cannot speak of God!” The nearly conspiratorial notion that some in Brazil, allegedly some sort of powerful elite, would not allow her or others to speak of God had been widespread among Bolsonaro’s allies, for instance his Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo, who celebrated the inauguration of Bolsonaro with this proclamation: “The last barrier has been broken: we can now talk about God in public. Who could imagine?” (Araújo 2019). One of the implications of Fernandes’ claim that Lula had “sold his soul” was presumably that Afro-Brazilian religiosity was the work of the devil and, in doing so, the rhetoric seemed to work on a religiously intolerant position with regard to Afro-Brazilian minorities.

Lula won the presidential election by 1.8% of the votes. A higher share of Evangelicals voted for Bolsonaro, but this portion of the Brazilian electorate was more divided in 2022 than in 2018. Lula’s inauguration took place on January 1, 2023. Although not strictly part of the events leading up to Lula’s inauguration speech, it still must be noted that one week later, on January 8, 2023, when thousands of people stormed Congress (besides the Senate and the Supreme Court) in Brasília, some of the perpetrators were observed praying and singing gospel songs while others broke furniture, damaged historical documents, and desecrated symbols of the nation (in a parallel manner to the storming of the US Capitol in Washington, two years earlier). During the Federal Police investigations of such criminal activities, some of the perpetrators testified that Evangelical churches mobilized them to act, paying relevant costs and organizing the caravans.¹⁶ In other words, there was also a visible religious dimension to the storming of the Congress in Brasília.

¹⁵ <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/colunas/monicabergamo/2022/08/michelle-compartilha-video-contralula-que-associa-religoes-africanas-a-trevas-e-diz-isso-pode-ne.shtml>

¹⁶ <https://noticias.uol.com.br/colunas/aguirre-talento/2023/03/15/presos-no-81-dizem-a-pf-que-igrejas-pagaram-onibus-para-ato-em-brasilia.htm>

Analysis

The discourses analyzed in conjunction with their respective orders of discourse are the following:

- Bolsonaro's victory speech (October 2018)
- Bolsonaro's inaugural speech (January 2019)
- Lula's victory speeches (October 2022)
- Lula's inaugural speeches (January 2023)

We shall begin with the analysis of Bolsonaro's discourses, and, for such endeavor, it is imperative to outline some aspects of his victory and the material social context in which his election takes place in 2018. After having spent more than two decades as a Member of Congress (Federal level) with a relatively low public profile and minimal influence, Bolsonaro's last term (2015–2019) was marked by a change in his profile. He became more visible and notorious after associating with emerging political groups and ideas, such as the anti-PT sentiment (anti-Worker's Party sentiment)—which gained momentum after 14 years of the Worker's Party in power—as well as the religious conservatives (the Evangelicals in a broad sense and neoconservative Catholic groups), security forces and pro-guns groups (army, police, arms industry). Bolsonaro's public speeches, attacks on the media, opinions on sensitive issues like minorities' rights and human rights in general have not changed since his first presidential campaign and the claims that Brazilian society can be destroyed by left-wing ideology have been reiterated (Mezzanotti and Grifiths 2020). In other words, the political left posed an existential threat to Brazilian society in Bolsonaro's perspective.

In his 2018 victory speech, Bolsonaro's first phrase was a biblical one: "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free." The quotation from the Gospel of John (8:32 NRSVUV) set the tone for what was to follow. First, it could signal a political proximity to Evangelicals that had been instrumental for Bolsonaro's victory. Aware that the Bible was an identity marker for Brazil's Evangelical Protestants more than it had been for Catholics, the very act of quoting a biblical verse was symbolically significant. Second, although it was not stated explicitly, the words were actually the incarnated Son's words within a common Christian understanding of them. And so, Bolsonaro could function as the medium of Jesus' words, as if the ongoing revelation took place through him. Third, the phrase "you will know the truth" could be understood on the background of the established dichotomy within Bolsonaro's discourse between the "true people" or nation on the one hand and the enemy on the other, an enemy that Bolsonaro had identified with the Worker's Party. He had consistently portrayed the party and the political left as a corrupt elite determined to spread their harmful ideology (Tamaki and Fuks 2020), as if the ideology was based on lies that would manipulate the population. In Bolsonaro's words, this enemy was "a gang with a red flag and 'brain-washed'" (quoted in *ibid*, 115). As presumably brain-washed, this "gang" obviously did not know "the truth" Bolsonaro was referring to with Jesus' words. By quoting the gospel's words, Bolsonaro can be said to implicitly present himself as knowing "the truth," including the Christian

truth, as opposed to those he did not name in the speech and had denounced through his campaign: what he imagined to be the corrupt leftist elite. By quoting the second part of Jesus's words "... and the truth will set you free," Bolsonaro could effectively tie himself and his presidency to a truth that would lead "you" (the authentic Brazilian people) to freedom. Bolsonaro had after all constructed an idea of the corrupt leftist elite as one that imposed their ideology on the people, for instance by allegedly indoctrinating Brazilian school children in the so-called gender ideology.

After quoting Jesus, Bolsonaro turned into a testimonial form in the first person: "I have never been alone. I have always felt the presence of God and the force of the Brazilian people." Bolsonaro built on the public impression that he had always been an outsider in the Brazilian Congress that stood on his own without political allies. In the times of political crises in Brazil, with widespread mistrust toward the entire political establishment, that was an image Bolsonaro had exploited in order to gain popularity. Here Bolsonaro could strengthen the image of himself as a heroic figure enduring loneliness in the political desert, since he claimed that his only allies were God and the Brazilian people. Through all these years, as a political outsider, he had experienced "the presence of God" and "the force of the Brazilian people." Said otherwise, divine presence could be felt simultaneously as the people's force or power. Importantly this notion of one people having one force that the populist leader has privileged access to is inherent to the populist construction of the people as one homogeneous entity. By connecting this homogeneous people to "God" and implicitly to Jesus of the Gospel, Bolsonaro had placed the homogeneous Brazilian people in a special relation to the divine being. He could have chosen a different religious text to quote and, therefore, to build his political authority on. It is, however, no coincidence that he chose words from a canonical text embodying the highest imaginable authority within a specific religion: Jesus Christ, the Son of God that according to Christian faith revealed God's ultimate will for the world. At the time of the rise of Bolsonaro, Christianity was, by far, the largest religion in Brazil and Evangelical churches a powerful expression for its revitalization. Christians were the clear majority in religious terms. This reality gave shape to Bolsonaro's religious populism. One of the clearest expressions of Bolsonaro's populist definition of the "true people" as exclusively Christian could be heard during a campaign rally in 2017, in the City of Campina Grande (Paraíba State), where he proclaimed:

"God above all! There is no secular state. The state is Christian and the minorities that are against that, they can leave the country. The minorities have to bend down to the majorities."¹⁷

¹⁷ Our translation from Portuguese: "Somos um país cristão. Deus acima de tudo. Não tem essa história, essa historinha de Estado laico, não. É Estado cristão. E quem for contra que se mude. Vamos fazer o Brasil para as maiorias. As minorias têm que se curvar. As leis devem existir para defender as maiorias. As minorias se adequam ou simplesmente desaparecem." Bolsonaro quoted in Ricardo Mariano og Dirceu André Gerardi, «Apoio evangélico a Bolsonaro: antipetismo e sacralização da direita,» in *Novo ativismo político no Brasil: os evangélicos do século XXI*, red. José Luis Pérez Guadalupe and Brenda Carranza (Rio de Janeiro: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2020), 336.

This frontal attack on minorities in the name of a Christian majority that has no respect for secularity illustrates Bolsonaro's populist idea of the people based on their religious faith and adherence, but also his illiberal populism and its willingness to sacrifice the rights of minorities. What is more, the notion of 'disappearance' could also allude to the disappearances of the military regime in Brazil that Bolsonaro had praised in shocking ways often unheard of in the Brazilian public square.

As elected president, Bolsonaro would repeat the idea of Brazil as a Christian nation, while also admitting some sort of secularity of the state, as when he announced that he would nominate "a terribly Evangelical" ("*terrivelmente evangélico*") judge to the Supreme Court in July 2019 (Bolsonaro quoted in Campos Machado 2020, 284). The selection of a judge to the Supreme Court that was based on the person's religious identity rather than his professional records and capabilities was justified by Bolsonaro with his slightly altered and moderated vision of the Brazilian state. Although he militantly no longer denounced secularity in the name of the Christian majority outright, he maintained that "the state is secular, but we are Christians" ("o Estado é laico, mas somos cristãos"). On other occasions, he would state that "our government is Christian" ("*nosso governo e cristão*").¹⁸ This was Bolsonaro's claim for a national Christian state project, which culminated with the slogan "*Brazil above everything, God above everyone*" (Casarões 2020), with which he ended triumphantly both his victory speech and his inauguration speech.

The religious tone of the first part of Bolsonaro's victory speech was notably high. Bolsonaro stated that it was the religious acts of Brazilians' "prayers" that faced with "a threat" had put the country "above everything." At some point, the "messianic" aspect of his persona built up, when Bolsonaro referred to his trips throughout the country during his campaign and claimed to have repeatedly been recognized by the people as "our only hope" ("*Bolsonaro, você é a nossa esperança*"). Apparently not the arrogant and self-centered politician that would think only he could lead Brazil, Bolsonaro humbly referred to others throughout the country that pointed to him as the sole savior of the nation. In that way, he implicitly constructed the idea of himself as the ultimate outsider and savior of the "true people." As if the role of God for Bolsonaro's electoral victory had not been sufficiently emphasized, one of his last remarks was to have received a new "birth certificate" ("*ganhei uma nova certidão de nascimento*") when, "under the work of God" and the medical team responsible for him when he was hospitalized during the campaign, he survived the famous attempt on his life.

There was an emphasis on national unity and liberal rights in Bolsonaro's victory speech, in a notable contrast to the illiberal views and exclusionary populist claims during his campaign. His religious populism was tempered. But discursive coherence is no typical virtue of an opportunistic populist. Bolsonaro was arguably, after all, the elected Brazilian president with the most populist campaign in 20 years (Tamaki and Fuks 2020, 104). What should be noted from his victory speech is that his promise to uphold the Constitution, democracy and freedom is "not the word of a man" but an "oath to God." In this way, Bolsonaro's discourse

¹⁸ For instance, on Twitter in September 2020.

sacralizes the main components of Brazil's liberal democracy. This could also be read considering the background of Bolsonaro's former illiberal statements, such as his hailing of the human rights violations of the military regime, that in the moment of celebrating his democratic victory are balanced by programmatic statements attuned to the politically acceptable as a way to legitimize the legal order Bolsonaro is to govern. One could therefore argue that Bolsonaro's religious populism did not come to full expression in his victory speech, but certain core elements of it were held back, such as the explicit demonization of political opponents. Something similar occurred in his inauguration speech a couple months later.

Bolsonaro's inauguration speech also included a messianic tone, which elevated himself to a condition of "chosen by God." While this naturally resonates with the religious approach, it also supports the building of an identity of a religious leader to an equally predominantly religious nation. The building of this semi-religious leader is strengthened by building the image of an "ordinary and simple person," who—similarly to Jesus Christ—possesses some fragilities while fighting against the establishment in some sort of political-religious crusade (Demuru 2021, 269). In the inauguration speech, Bolsonaro implicitly built the image of himself as one chosen by God through the renewed attention to the violent attack on him during the campaign. Bolsonaro thanks God for being alive. Then, he proclaims that "through professional hands" his life was saved in what was "a true miracle." Instead of explaining how modern doctors diagnosed and treated him in the well-equipped hospital by rational means and science, Bolsonaro dramatically assures the Brazilian public that his life was saved through a supernatural intervention by God himself. Stated otherwise, Bolsonaro's presidency was meant to be. There was divine intention behind his candidacy that defeated the enemy. Bolsonaro uses explicitly the notion of "enemies" when he states that the "enemies of the Fatherland" ("*os inimigos da Pátria*") attempted to put an end to his life. Political leftists are not explicitly mentioned here, but the implicit idea is, of course, that there are friends and foes of the nation and the foes violently attacked Bolsonaro but were defeated by God.

"Mission" is one of the religiously loaded terms in Bolsonaro's inauguration speech that can connote "crusade" or "evangelization" in a Christian sense, but is also a word in the everyday language that can be used for more secular services and tasks. In Bolsonaro's discourse, it occurs as a perspective on the overall governance Bolsonaro is entrusted with as newly elected president ("*aos brasileiros, que confiaram a mim a honrosa missão de governar o Brasil*"), but also more specifically as way of saving Brazil from evils such as corruption, crime, economic irresponsibility, and what Bolsonaro labels "ideological submission." Interestingly, Bolsonaro declares that he is on a mission to finally and definitively liberate Brazil from this evil. He creates the impression that he as the new president is actually able to eradicate all corruption and all crime once and for all. But construing a more just country requires in Bolsonaro's view that "the political class" is obliterated or wiped out ("*maculando a classe política*"), involving a typical populist antielitism that works with the premise that a political elite can be wiped out without the danger of a new one being created in its place. Interestingly, he is also capable of eradicating "ideological submission," a mission he explains in the following manner:

We will unite the people, we will value the family, respect the religions and our Jewish-Christian tradition, combat the ideology of gender, as we conserve our values. Our Brazil will again be a country free from ideological tethers.¹⁹

Bolsonaro imagines one people united by his governance that will conserve its values through resistance toward “ideology of gender” – an ideology he claimed in his campaign to be imposed on Brazilian classrooms as one of several ideologies that the political left indoctrinated Brazilian society with as a means to alienate kids from the true heterosexual nature. But the very idea of an “ideology of gender” should be understood as a religious ideology or concept in order to mobilize against LGBTQ+ rights and politics for sexual minorities. The idea that there are traditional family values threatened by an ideology of gender is itself a religious ideology, disseminated by Evangelical pastors as well as Catholic priests and sustained by various Christian theologies that uphold traditional gender polarities. By adopting this religious ideology, Bolsonaro sustains his ideologically thin populism with more ideological content. He makes his religious populism thicker with a religious ideology and value system.

In sum, Bolsonaro’s two speeches bear traits from a religious populism that was more evidently manifested during his campaign but that nonetheless came to expression in his victory speech and inauguration speech. Bolsonaro creates the Brazilian people discursively as a homogeneous entity with a special relation to God. This is a people that is partly defined by its Christian identity, is existentially threatened by its enemies but has a hope in the populist leader, the only hope if we are to believe in what is considered the true people’s voice in Bolsonaro’s discourse. What his more, these speeches function on the basis of a preestablished *bolsonarista* discourse that also underpins the idea of the people, of God and of Bolsonaro himself. For instance, the idea of the godless leftist elite that is threatening the Christian majority with its proliferation of “cultural Marxism” is an idea that these ceremonial speeches presuppose.

After being elected in the second round of the 2022 presidential elections Lula gave two victory speeches, the first one in a hotel as results were made public and the second in public in presence of thousands of supporters. For the political orchestration of the inauguration, Lula also gave two speeches, one to the public outside the Congress building and one inside Congress.

In what was Lula’s first public address after his electoral victory, Lula praises the Brazilian people and its democracy as winners beyond differences with regard to political party, ideology, or personal interests. Lula calls for the reunification of the people, the end of polarization, the fight to end hunger, the return of social programs, to fight against inequality and extreme poverty. The people wanted more and not less democracy, affirms Lula, adding civic values such as freedom, equality and fraternity to the new historical triumph of Brazilian democracy. He celebrates the

¹⁹ Our translation of: “*Vamos unir o povo, valorizar a família, respeitar as religiões e nossa tradição judaico-cristã, combater a ideologia de gênero, conservando nossos valores. O Brasil voltará a ser um País livre das amarras ideológicas.*”.

victory as if democracy itself was at stake in the election that, in Lula's view, was one of the most important in Brazilian history. He then declares that the Brazilian people this day had exercised the sacred duty to choose who to govern their lives ("*o direito sagrado de escolher quem vai governar a a sua vida*"). In other words, the right to choose the rulers of Brazil is not just a civil right or human right. It is a religious or sacred right. In this way, Lula's discourse sacralizes this particular dimension of Brazilian political life. Democracy is not just upheld by secular aspirations, but hinges on something that also pertains to the religious sphere: the right to vote.

Importantly, however, before Lula speaks about these political realities that concern the country and its people, the newly elected president of Brazil gives testimony to his personal relation to God. He thanks God since he "always thought that God was very generous with me." It was God that, according to Lula, had allowed him to leave the place where he grew up in order to become what he became ("*permitted que eu saísse de onde eu saí para chegar onde eu cheguei*"), particularly in this moment when confronted by an adversary, an opponent. Although he did not make it explicit, by speaking of where he came from Lula likely referred to his extraordinary journey from a poor upbringing in the Northeast of Brazil to becoming the country's president. When Lula adds that God allowed this to happen when faced by "an adversary," this obviously referred to Bolsonaro. Without naming Bolsonaro, Lula thereby claimed that he had been brought into his political position and defeated Bolsonaro in the election through the intervention of God. God had been particularly generous toward Lula as he had been singled out for this purpose. The Brazilian people had with God's help voted for the right candidate. Furthermore, Lula confesses that he sees himself as a candidate that experienced "a resurrection in the Brazilian politics" ("*ressurreição na política brasileira*") since "they tried to bury me alive and here I am" ("*tentaram me enterrar vivo e eu estou aqui*"). With obvious Christian connotations of the word "resurrection," Lula's experience of being buried alive, that is imprisoned by Brazilian authorities from April 2018 to November 2019, is arguably given a transcendental meaning. Lula has followed in Christ's footsteps. Although Lula was not crucified, he was buried alive and if he was resurrected after being brought to his political positions with the help of God it follows that it was also God himself that resurrected Lula from the political death he had suffered and gave him a new political life embodied in his electoral victory. Lula's God stands behind Brazil's democracy. Lula emphasizes that Brazil is in a very difficult situation, but he affirms that he has faith in God ("*tenho fé em Deus*") and that with the help of the people the new political leadership will find a way to once again live democratically ("*viver democraticamente*"), as if this had not been possible in recent times.

In the last part of the speech, Lula refers to the fact that Pope Francis had sent a message to Brazil, praying for the Brazilian people to be set free from hatred, intolerance, and violence. He assures the public that his newly elected government desires the same transformation of Brazil as Pope Francis calls for. In that way, he legitimates his victorious candidacy with the highest formal authority in Brazil's dominant religious tradition: Catholicism. That said, Pope Francis does not only symbolize the Catholic tradition in this context, although it is well known that Lula is Catholic. Research has shown that Pope Francis is not only the head of one of

the most trustworthy social institutions in Latin America, but he is also a strikingly popular pope in this region with high approval ratings (Bohigues and Rivas 2021). What is more, analyses of Brazilian media show that Pope Francis has, for the most part, been portrayed as a figure that wants reform and change in the Catholic church. He has gained an image in Brazilian press as a progressive pope (Texeira de Godoy and Perez Castilho 2022). Hence, by tapping into his legacy, Lula can also achieve justification or symbolic support for his own image as a progressive that is also Christian.

When affirming that his government wants the same as Pope Francis, Lula takes recourse in a powerful moral language with biblical resonance. He proclaims that his government will work tirelessly for a Brazil “where love prevails over hate,” as if he was ready to live in accordance with Jesus’ admonition to his disciples to love those who hate you (Matt 5:44) or dwell in the love that is the greatest of all Christian virtues (1 Cor 13:13) and that never ends (1 Cor 13:8). In fact, Lula declares that he believes love is the most central virtue for a governor (“*a mais importante virtude de um bom governante será sempre o amor*”) and assures Brazilians that “all the days of my life I remember the greatest teaching of Jesus Christ” (“*Todos os dias da minha vida eu me lembro do maior ensinamento de Jesus Cristo*”) which is to love one’s neighbor.

Lula’s second victory speech is filled with several of the same religious elements, just in a different form. The speech begins with thankfulness toward politicians that supported his campaign and a statement that this was the victory of democracy and freedom against authoritarianism. Lula shows concern with the (lack of) proper transition between outgoing and incoming administration teams, elaborates on policies to be implemented and, approximately in the middle of the speech, thanks voters and asks for “God to bless each and every one of you.” In the second half of the speech, after discussing the victory of democracy, thanking the people and his fellow politicians, indicating the intended policies of his administration, Lula states the following: “I have almost been buried alive. I consider this moment that I am living almost like resurrection. I have recovered. They thought that they had killed me, they thought that they had ended my political life, they destroyed me telling lies about me. And thank God I am here, strong and firm...” This is followed with: “I say that God has been very generous with me, because to leave where I left from, not starving to death before 5 years of age and becoming President twice and returning at 77 years old to win another election can only be the work of God and the Brazilian people. That is why I cannot fail you, I cannot fail my own faith...” Lula thanks God, claims that “God has made us all equal” and closes his speech by repeating three times, in the last paragraph, “may God bless you.”

Lula’s inaugural speeches contained less religious elements. In the first inauguration speech outside the Congress, Lula made no reference to God, religion, or faith, except when referring to love for Brazil and unbreakable faith in the Brazilian people. His inaugural speech inside the Congress includes two references to God: “Under the protections of God (“*sob a proteção de Deus*”), I open this mandate reaffirming that in Brazil faith can be present in all homes, in different temples, churches, and cults. In this country, everyone will be able to exercise their faith

freely.”²⁰ These statements may seem superfluous, and they were not considered apt or necessary during his inauguration speeches in 2003 and 2007. In 2023, however, they can be read considering the impression that some of Bolsonaro’s rhetoric had left in Brazil: that there actually was a danger that Lula would not allow religion to be freely exercised and that churches would be closed. Therefore, stating the obvious in an inauguration speech could also be motivated by an attempt to confront political disinformation about Lula’s religious agendas.

Lula is aware of, and does not seem to reject or deconstruct, the place of religion in the exercise of power within institutional and situational realms of Brazilian society. As an experienced politician, he is also aware of the unique relevance of religious politicians at all levels of political institutions in the country. His discourse is aimed at building consensus through the expression of a Brazilian sort of civil religion. Although marked by a considerable respect for the Catholic Church and its pope, Lula’s civil religion remains essentially non-confessional. His vision of God’s role in Brazilian politics is so vaguely defined that it can include nearly all religious groups in the country. This inclusive aspect of Lula’s civil religion is also foreshadowed and set in scene with his active participation in the Candomblé ritual during the 2022 campaign. In sum, the political religion that comes to expression in Lula’s speeches is a legitimization of religious pluralism. Furthermore, this is a civil religion since Lula repeatedly emphasizes the divine purpose of politics. His vision of the political is not anticlerical or militantly secularist. Far from it, he underlines and reserves a space for religion in the political. This is not to say that Lula’s political religion is a complex religious system or ideology that sets limits for political debate and decision-making in a nearly theocratic sense. Lula’s political religion is rather a civil religion without a formal creed and with a small set of general ideas about the religious dimension of politics: God stands behind democracy and the love that Jesus of the Gospels taught should guide the moral behavior of governors. Last, there are some biblical archetypes behind Lula’s civil religion: God is one, the love of neighbor of Jesus Christ and resurrection from the dead. These are biblical models that clearly inspire Lula’s religious discourse in these Brazilian political ceremonies.

Final Remarks

Bolsonaro’s exclusionary vision of a Christian majority without any obligation to adapt to the needs of minorities was softened as he was elected president. He came to admit that the Brazilian state was secular (“*laico*”) without admitting that the religious identity of its people was diverse, exemplified by the presence of Afro-Brazilian religious minorities. Bolsonaro’s emphasis on the Christian nature of the people continued, however, in his efforts to retain the beneficial alliance with the Christian electorate and the Evangelical Caucus in the Congress. In

²⁰ Our translation of <https://noticias.uol.com.br/politica/ultimas-noticias/2023/01/01/posse-lula-discursos-congresso-planalto-integra.htm>

contrast, Lula's vision of the people is less exclusive in religious terms and more an expression of an inclusive civil religion.

Lula's discourse favors and envisages a democratic republic anchored in a constitution that protects freedom of religion and a secular state. Lula seems to accept a reality in which the state is formally secular, but the people are religious. He sacralizes the democratic right to vote and choose governors. But Lula seems not to dispute the secularist nature of the constitutionally established state: it is secular, even though it is blessed by God.

Norman Fairclough's ideas on the purposes of the explanation phase within discourse analysis relate to a critical examination of the ways in which language is used to reproduce power relations, construct and maintain particular social identities, reinforce dominant ideologies or challenge existing power structures. This involves consideration for the broader historical, political, and cultural context in which discourse is situated, as well as the social practices and institutions that shape and are shaped by the use of discourse. By understanding how discourse is used for social action, shaping and reflecting societal norms, values and power dynamics, one can unravel or identify opportunities for social change and transformation, as well as unveil the complexities and nuances within discursive practices.

By applying this methodology, this study has allowed us to situate religious political discourse in the context of Brazilian presidential elections under a specific constitutional foundation. We have been able to witness a process of desecularization. A notable shift in Brazil's societal and political landscape has been noted, including a dynamic interplay between secular and religious forces.

It is nonetheless possible to compare the discourses of Bolsonaro and Lula through the lenses of Norman Fairclough's explanation phase based on the following criteria:

- **Reproduction of power relations:** whereas Bolsonaro's political religious discourse reinforces power asymmetries, positions himself as chosen by God and a defender of traditional Christian values and morality, Lula's discourse is based on the religious assumption that he was blessed by God for being chosen by the people to challenge power asymmetries and advocate for social justice.
- **Promotion of ideologies:** Bolsonaro's political religious discourse promotes conservative ideologies tied to neoconservative Christian activism, such as opposition to LGBTQ+ rights and abortion, as well as progressive gender norms. By doing so, Bolsonaro tries to reproduce a mindset of conservative values. Lula's political religious discourse, on the other hand, is linked with Christian values of solidarity and compassion, defending the welfare of the vulnerable, thus promoting an egalitarian ideology.
- **Construction of social identities:** by proclaiming himself as the one chosen by God, Bolsonaro's discourse attempts to position himself as the "blessed knight" who will defeat opponents that want to destroy traditional Brazilian values. Lula's religious political discourse aims at exploring the social identity of the Brazilian people and proposing religious values as the path to a progressive and inclusive society.

In conclusion, although Bolsonaro's exclusionary religious populism can be contrasted to Lula's inclusionary civil religion, there are also some interesting similarities between the two figures: both legitimate their presidential mandate in a divine authority. Bolsonaro builds a discourse around the assumption, often pronounced by others or projected onto others, that he is chosen by God to lead the country since he is "the only hope" for the nation in times of crises. Lula does not outright claim that he is chosen by God, but he nevertheless presents himself as led by God onto a particular political trajectory that culminates in the fate of being buried alive and resurrected within a Brazilian democracy supported and backed by God. Accordingly, Lula is not a secular leftist that can simply be contrasted to the religious rightist Bolsonaro. Both Lula and Bolsonaro politicize Brazilian religion—each in their own way.

For understandable reasons, research has paid far more attention to Bolsonaro's use of religion in Brazilian politics than Lula's. Given Bolsonaro's illiberal authoritarianism it has been paramount for scholars to gain a deeper understanding of this new political phenomenon of the far right. Nevertheless, it is time that we also focus on the ways politicians on the political center-left politicize Brazilian religion.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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