
Echoes of the discourse of purity in religion and politics as effects of the memory of the christian apocalypse

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the echoes of the discourse of purity within a fundamentalist religious doctrine, proposing the hypothesis that those echoes reverberate in political powers that shift the focus from urgent humanitarian crises to a memory of the Christian apocalypse. The study employs a theoretical and methodological framework grounded on discourse analysis and Michel Foucault's concepts of knowledge-power, and ethics. We aim to present purity as a discourse through operational concepts such as memory domain and echo. The results indicate a memory of the Christian and medieval apocalypse linked to the discourse of purity, which echoes across time and space. This, within contemporary conditions of possibility, leads to a fundamentalist movement that revitalizes the perception of the end of the world, while disregarding threats identified by the scientific community.

Keywords: Discourse of purity; Apocalypse; Memory domain; Knowledge-power; Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change, ecological collapse, and pandemics are examples of some threats of human extinction that permeate the scientific sphere and resonate in public policies worldwide. However, since science is not the final arbiter of truth, religious groups have, in recent decades, sought to politically echo some of their statements in opposition to the discourse of science. This dynamic can be observed in the connection between the former Brazilian president Jair Messias Bolsonaro and evangelical fundamentalism¹; under his administration, religious denialism against the COVID-19 pandemic, the opposition to the environmentalist movement, and the dismantling of environmental public agencies became government policy. Alongside its anti-scientific stance, his government promoted initiatives that echoed the discourse of purity such as a campaign focused on youth chastity.

As a counterpoint to science, evangelical fundamentalism attempts to establish, either explicitly or implicitly, that the threat of human extinction is rooted in the biblical phenomenon of the Apocalypse². An illustration of that could be observed in instances such as the use of a bracelet with a Bible verse from the Book of Revelation, by the President, during his inauguration ceremony, the public assertion of the imminence of the Apocalypse by First Lady Michelle Bolsonaro³, and the presence of Israeli flags alongside Brazilian ones in demonstrations pro-Bolsonaro over the past few years, due in part to the belief that the return of Israel is one of the signs of the Apocalypse (Herrmann, 2023).

Since the extinction of humanity is regarded as apocalyptic rather than environmental or epidemiological, religion and politics align on the defense of an ethical purification of the population, through what are held to be traditional family values along with a form of purity (Dowland, 2015). In light of the issue, this study analyzes how the discourse of purity permeates both political and religious spheres. We examine the ethics of purity that gained prominence during the Central Middle Ages in the wake of the

¹ The term fundamentalist, in the evangelical context of the 20th century, is claimed by the more conservative evangelicals themselves and functions as an identity qualification in favor of a supposedly purer biblical reading and in an attempt to return to what would be the foundations of the Bible in its purity, which contradicts various scientific statements (Hefley, 1991).

² Article “O Apocalipse de Jair Bolsonaro” published in *Veja* on 03/01/2019. Available at: <https://veja.abril.com.br/coluna/radar/o-apocalipse-de-jair-bolsonaro/> [Accessed on 18/06/2024].

³ Article entitled “Michelle Bolsonaro fala sobre 'previsão' de Baby sobre apocalipse: ‘acontecerá’” published in *Correio Braziliense* on 14/02/2024. Available at: <https://www.correiobrasiliense.com.br/politica/2024/02/6802891-michelle-bolsonaro-fala-sobre-previsao-de-baby-sobre-apocalipse-acontecera.html> [Retrieved on 18 June 2024]

apocalyptic movement; to outline the political-religious context of the 20th century in which the memory of purity was reconfigured, and understand how the discourse of purity has resonated, by invoking the Christian apocalypse under new conditions of possibility.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study analyzes conditions of production, circulation, and reception of utterances encompassing the relationships between knowledge and power. It draws on the theoretical and methodological framework of *Discourse Analysis* proposed by Foucault (2013), along with operational concepts such as the *memory domain*, understood as a past that resonates and reconfigures the present, not by defining a body of truths, but by establishing relationships of genesis, transformation, continuity, and discontinuity (Foucault, 2014a). It also employs the term *echo*, used by the French thinker to refer to the layers of an event that, despite their connection to preceding ones, are discontinuous, resulting in a reconfigured repetition (Ribeiro Júnior, 2022).

In our analysis, we argue for the existence of a discourse of purity. Foucault (2022) contends that all societies have techniques and operations focused on the quest for purity. However, for purity to be considered a discourse, according to Foucault's theory, it must present characteristics of generality and discontinuity (Foucault, 2014a). Those characteristics become evident in the various reconfigurations of the discourse of purity, where ethical modalities, namely forms of self-care that denote care of the soul, are manifested over time.

To illustrate the existence of a discourse of purity beyond religious and sexual contexts, which are often intertwined with it, we can examine the colonization of the Americas when the concept of blood purity was reconfigured into racial distinctions, establishing a hierarchy between supposedly superior and inferior races. This legacy of racial classification continues to echo in contemporary racism (Anchieta, 1933; León, 2005). After the abolition of slavery in the United States, segregationist laws and movements such as the Ku Klux Klan sought to maintain racial purity, depicting the horror of miscegenation and its supposed threat to the nation (Brito, 2023). Over the subsequent decades, the movement toward racial purity echoed as conservatism, reactionary ideologies, and struggles against civil rights and social movements (Schnelle, 2009; Hefley, 1991).

These events demonstrate how the discourse of purity resonated across different spheres, intersecting religion and politics. They call for an analysis of their knowledge-power dynamics, particularly concerning the influence of Christian apocalyptic memory on contemporary areas such as public policy. Since impurity denotes various forms of socio-cultural danger (Douglas, 2014), the discourse of the end times would, thus, imply a maximal eschatology of the impure.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

In its early stages, Christian ethics associated the culture of self-care with the necessary austerity to overcome the sin of the flesh, thereby reconfiguring the Hellenic conception of purity, in which eroticism did not hold the same centrality (Foucault, 2021). Around the year 1000, there was an intensification of a pessimistic belief regarding the future of the human species, with the idea of the imminent Apocalypse. This echoed an ethic that intensified the denial of worldly things and the development of self-techniques focused on personal purity. In the subsequent centuries, the dissemination of the doctrine of Christian sexual chastity led to a closer convergence between the notions of purity and virginity, also as a reaction to the political, economic, and cultural transformations resulting from the development of cities (Richard, 1993).

Between the medieval period and contemporary times, the memory of purity has been reconfigured in various ways, manifesting as denominational purity, purity of blood, racial purity, medical-biological purity, and political purity, among other forms, reaching the 20th century amid conditions of possibility that resonated within the very order of the discourse of purity. In this context, struggles in defense of ethical paradigms divergent from the conventional notion of purity, such as the sexual revolution, the civil rights movement, and feminism, stand in opposition to fundamentalist and conservative groups that advocate for an understanding of purity that increasingly departs itself from the prevailing regime of truth (Dowland, 2015).

In resistance to secularism-related discourses and statements, the fundamentalist movement among American evangelicals found a significant milestone around 1910 with the publication of twelve small volumes in a series titled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of the Truth*, which promoted a purer and more literal reading of biblical texts, including the Book of Revelation. These texts precipitated the emergence of a group of followers who called themselves fundamentalists, in opposition to moderates or liberals (Hefley,

1991; Smith, 1997). Under these new conditions of possibility, the discourse of purity echoed in the alignment between the ideological spectrum of the political-economic right, including the Republican Party in the U.S., and conservative and fundamentalist evangelicals, in the following decades (Schnelle, 2009).

Until the 1960s, the fundamentalist discourse on purity had not yet gained significant traction within the major evangelical denominations, since the moderate and liberal statements were still regarded as truth by the prevailing order of discourse. According to the principle of inversion (Foucault, 2014b), to integrate the reformulated doctrine, it would be necessary to play the negative game of cutting and rarefying this discourse, to hinder and exclude many of the moderate statements in favor of a fundamentalist will to truth, which required change in power relations.

In this same context, Pastor Francis Schaeffer popularized a theology that should encompass religion and politics. In his book *A Christian Manifesto*, which sold over a million copies, Schaeffer (1982) argued that Christian purity required total rejection of humanism and application of Christian principles to *all* aspects of reality, including government and legislation. He criticized attempts to reconcile Christian and secular views. According to the theologian, secularism was a distortion that compromised faith. Therefore, to offer resistance, and civil disobedience against laws that contradict divine principles would be justified.

In 1979, the fundamentalist group in the Southern Baptist Convention explicitly claimed that purity was their purpose (Hefley, 1991), marking an unprecedented takeover of the institution's leadership. Subsequently, their resolutions shifted towards the political right. The discourse of purity manifested in the literal interpretation of the Bible became integrated into Southern Baptist doctrine, thus moderates were excluded from key positions of power within the convention (Smith, 1997), and from the dominant discourse.

According to Taylor C. Boas (2023), the conditions of possibility for the increasing politicization of evangelical identity arose from the sense of threat to the group's interests and values. As a reaction, were echoed discourses that revived the memory of an imminent apocalyptic, as a consequence of a secularized world, distanced from the fundamentalist doctrine of purity, and therefore deemed impure; an idea that reconfigures the medieval movement for purity against the backdrop of eschatological fears.

Echoes of purity discourse have been voiced by religious figures such as Lindsey Hal and Carole Carlson, relating the apocalyptic memory to fundamentalist doctrine and

giving rise to a new popular eschatology. In *Satan Is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* (Lindsey & Carlson, 1972), the authors explore how Satan, in the modern world, seeks to influence individuals, governments, and institutions through deceptive teachings and movements, highlighting pure faith as a crucial defense against end-times. In *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Lindsey & Carlson, 1980), the authors defend a literal interpretation of apocalyptic biblical prophecies, highlighting how global conflicts and natural disasters are signs of the imminent second coming of Jesus Christ, following the rise of the Antichrist—a world leader who would unite nations under a false peace—and the conversion spiritual and revival of Israel in Palestine.

Therefore, if global conflicts and natural disasters are perceived as signs of the apocalypse, as echoed in this memory, then, from a religious-fundamentalist perspective, the environmental and public health crises of COVID-19 would be seen as harbingers of the end times. Within this framework, as fundamentalism seeks a closer convergence between religion and state, scientific discourse now faces competition in the political arena not only from religious narratives but also from a discourse of purity. According to these theologies, responding to eschatological crises would require an ethical commitment to purity, supported by policies aligned with the fundamentalist movement, often at the expense of scientific reasoning.

Religious Fundamentalism, in alignment with traditionalism—an intellectual and philosophical movement that opposes the modern world, including traditional media, science, universities, the secularization of the state, humanism, and Enlightenment principles—has found resonance in the conspiracy theories propagated by ideologues such as Steve Bannon and Olavo de Carvalho. Those theories have been endorsed by presidents like Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro (Teitelbaum, 2020) and also major media channels like *Brasil Paralelo*, which reaches millions of viewers by disseminating scientific denialism and a theological version of history (Moraes; Cleto, 2023). For instance, in the documentary *Cortina de Fumaça*⁴, the channel accuses environmental NGOs of corruption and alleges that the environmentalist movement is an international political conspiracy to harm Brazilian agribusiness. Politically, during Bolsonaro's administration, this array of conspiracy theories was reflected in policies that disregarded

⁴ Available only for subscribers at <https://plataforma.brasilparalelo.com.br/playlists/cortina-de-fumaca> [Retrieved on 08 August 2024]

scientific concerns about the potential consequences of environmental disasters and climate change for humanity (Bronz, 2023).

As government policy in Brazil, denialism also influenced public policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. As analyzed by Clayton Guerreiro and Ronaldo de Almeida (2021), Brazilian Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal leaders, in support of Jair Bolsonaro's government, preached that believers would not transmit the coronavirus and that healing would come exclusively through Jesus. Instead of following scientific recommendations, the government promoted medications without proven effectiveness and invoked apocalyptic eschatology by adopting the discourse of religious purity as a defense against the pandemic.

The medieval Christian apocalyptic memory reinforced the importance of purity and virginity as ethics against the end times. Echoes of this memory can be observed in contemporary politics through the Federal Government's campaign *Adolescence First, Pregnancy Later – Everything in its own time*, another institutional adoption of the purity discourse in its modern form, this state initiative, led at the time by Damara Alves, Minister of Women, Family, and Human Rights and evangelical fundamentalist pastor, revived a series of evangelical statements about traditional family values, youth chastity, and sexual purity, adapting them as public policy despite scientific resistance and the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of this type of political-religious campaign (Albert; Silva; Farias, 2023). This episode exemplifies how, in the face of emergencies, a fundamentalist government, that leans towards the discourse of purity, chose to address crises by drawing upon a memory of the medieval Christian apocalypse.

CONCLUSIONS

The threat of the apocalypse during the Central Middle Ages, as a condition enabling the reconfiguration of the discourse of purity and, consequently, the techniques of purity, echoed across time and space, reaching the political-religious context of the 20th century under new perceptions of social threats. This memory, therefore, resonated in an eschatological conception that, while still recovering a memory of this medieval apocalypse, must engage with the political sphere, in a field of concomitance with science, to confront empirical conceptions and knowledge tied to the regime of truth regarding the threats—those most imminent to humanity as identified by science itself.

Fundamentalism directs political focus toward a discourse centered on traditional family values, chastity of adolescents, and sexual purity. Consequently, this apocalyptic perspective neglects significant humanitarian threats—as indicated by the scientific sphere in examples such as the COVID-19 pandemic and environmental emergencies.

The discourse of purity echoed and reconfigured in the present according to fundamentalism, traditionalism, and the reactionary political right, thus reviving the medieval memory that humanitarian crises should be addressed by *purification*. As this technique of self, reconfigured according to the current conditions of possibility, is defended not only as an individual process but also as a sociopolitical one, it directly impacts the development of public policies, opposing secularism and science.

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