

# Threatening sexualities: religion and homophobia(s) in evangelical discourses

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## Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.

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# Threatening sexualities: religion and homophobia(s) in evangelical discourses\*

Marcelo Natividade\*\*

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## 1. Introduction

This article examines some religious responses to the visibility and recognition of sexual diversity in the public sphere in contemporary Brazil. It examines the nexus between homophobia and religion, focusing on different forms of rejection and disqualification of sexual diversity among particular groups, discourses and religious institutions. It also explores the discourse of actors and institutions that self-identify as *evangelicals* and who present themselves as spokespersons of “Christian” values. We address the links between religious perceptions and *collective fears* (Miskolci 2007) that are triggered by the cultural transformations linked to the emergence of *sexual minorities* today.

The use of the expression “sexual diversity” as a way to address “non-heterosexual” populations seems to have accompanied the diffusion of the term GLS (“gays, lesbians, and sympathizers”) in the Brazilian market since 1994, as examined by França (2006). Recently, the term has come to be incorporated within actions of the Brazilian federal government—particularly among those which call for studies on “violence” and “homophobia” (providing support for this research, for example). In the scope of this work, “sexual diversity” is employed as a tool of analysis, circumscribing the ways of experiencing sexuality that diverge from the norm of heterosexuality. Although the expression “sexual diversity” can seem devoid of political character, being linked to consumerism and to the “GLS” market, it also signals political purposes associated with the growing visibility of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, *travestis* and transsexuals. It reveals an interesting potential as an instrument of analysis because it signals the inclusion of dissident heterosexualities, such as those that can emerge in strategies of presentation and processes of self-construction among transsexuals and *travestis*. It is necessary to keep in mind that although the expression may intend to include a plurality of experiences and modes of expression of subjectivity, in its social uses, it extrudes new, areas zones; and new marginalities—it excludes, for example, “pedophilia,” “zoophilia” and other sexual practices loaded with transgressive meanings.

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The ethnographic material presented here is heterogeneous, as it consists of texts collected between 2007 and 2008 from the internet, print media and religious sites. Our analysis synthesizes part of the results of a study conducted by the Nucleus. The larger study investigated perceptions and forms of action in the face of sexual diversity in various manifestations of Christianity in Brazil today. The project involves document research, ethnographic observation and interviews with congregants and religious leaders. One of the axes developed was the monitoring of debates about the rights of LGBT people in public spaces.<sup>1</sup>

The acronym LGBT (lesbians, gays, bisexuals, travestis and transsexuals) has come to be adopted by social movements that demand rights and citizenship for sexual minorities. In Brazil, this has been the case from the First National GLBT Conference in 2008 on. LGBT marks not only the political articulation that took place during the course of that event, but also signals the procedural character of collective identities. The present article thus concentrates on examining materials circulated by print and virtual media channels, understood here as discourses that connect to forms of action regarding sexual diversity in the public and private spheres.

One stage of bibliographic review discovered the persistence of a refractory religious scenario regarding manifestations of sexuality that escape the heterosexual norm (Natividade and Oliveira, 2007; Natividade, Oliveira and Lopes, 2008). One of the gaps that we found was a link between religion and phenomena that can be grouped together under the rubric of *homophobia*. This work seeks to explore this reflection. What could be the nexus between religion and sexual prejudice? The category *homophobia* is left over from a historical period in which the term “homosexuality” agglutinated manifestations of very distinct erotic dispositions under a single label. In the formulation proposed by the North American psychologist George Weinberg in the 1970s, the concept designated (and qualified as symptoms of a “mental illness”) feelings and attitudes of aversion to masculine and feminine homosexuality, as well as to “gender inversion”. The underlying motivations of these reactions of repudiation may be multiple, but their effects are aligned along a common axis, as they demarcate and detract from a specific category of people. In what context is it possible to socially construct behaviors, beliefs, or attitudes such as those that are implicated by *homophobia*? In light of these questions, this article analyzes discourses that circulate via websites and print media using religious justifications to repudiate homosexuality. The objective is to discuss the nexus between some religious segments’ perceptions of sexual diversity and the production of stereotypes, as well as certain modes of construction of legitimacy and illegitimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws from material produced within the research project Religious practices and perception of sexual diversity among Catholics and Evangelicals, coordinated by Professor Luiz Fernando Dias Duarte, Nucleus of Research on Subject, Interaction and Change, State University of Rio de Janeiro. Funded by the Ministry of Health, supported by the Commission for Citizenship and Reproduction, by the Support Program for Sexuality and Reproductive Health Research, Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning; and the Foundation for Research Support of the State of Rio de Janeiro. Lucas Ferreira Bilate, Igor Torres de Oliveira Ferreira, Paulo Victor Leite Lopes, Luiz Rogério de Jesus Cardoso, Michel Alcoforado, Margarida Saito and Felipe Brito participated as collaborators in this research.

## 2. The universe researched

This article draws upon research that identified a hegemonic scenario of Christian religious initiatives propagating diffuse arguments that disqualify sexual diversity. It also verified the emergence of alternative religious dissidents (Cf. Duarte, Natividade and Oliveira, 2009; and Natividade and Oliveira, 2007). This polarization is marked here by the use of the terms “inclusive” and “conservative”, circumscribing placements, discursive emphases or forms of action sustained by individuals, churches, groups and inter-denominational initiatives. Some of these inclusive churches promote mediations with the conservative universe, cultivating a more pentecostalized *ethos* and perceptions of sexual purity and impurity that does not rely on more rigid codes of conduct. These groups seem to exert a particular appeal to LGBT people who were expelled from evangelical denominations, reaching a greater number of congregants. They therefore play an important political role in the diffusion of the movement for inclusion as well as their theological perspectives and pastoral care (Cf. Duarte, Natividade and Oliveira, 2009). It should be noted that the mere use of the term “inclusion” by a church does not ensure its alignment with this movement. What defines a posture of “inclusion”, in this sense, is the suspension of the ban that marks homosexuality as a sin. An “inclusive” church permits the exercise of leadership roles by and its pastoral activities also focus on openly LGBT people. An evangelical church or denomination can adopt a posture of inclusion without necessarily being an inclusive church. An isolated leadership can express postures of inclusion in relative secrecy, expressing dissidence within a conservative church without openly breaking with it.

We identify postures of mediation in denominations such as the Anglican Church and the Lutheran Church. However, given our attention to the “problem” of homophobia, we privileged in our analysis a cross-section of discourses that endorse a ban on homosexuality, reiterate stereotypes and reinvent negative images of homosexuality, expressing postures of rejection to this sexual orientation. We analyzed in particular the internet sites of the *Brazilian Association of Support for those who wish to Leave Homosexuality*, the *Friends’ Group*, the *Brazil Exodus Group*, the *Movement for a Healthy Sexuality*, the *Body of Christian Psychologists and Psychiatrists*, the *Christian Apologetic Research Center*, the *Support Movement* blog, the *Júlio Severo* blog, and the *National Vision for Christian Consciousness* page. The monitoring of print media focused on Evangelical publications such as *Messenger of Peace* (published by the Assemblies of God), the *Eclésia* Magazine (Interdenominational) and the *Focus Gospel* Magazine (Interdenominational), in addition to the *Victory in Christ* Program conducted by pastor Silas Malafaia on Rede TV, shown on Saturdays. These sources are relevant because the opinions stated on these mediums circulate beyond congregational limits, reaching a broader public.

We collected materials in a total of 30 religious sites in addition to the site of the Federal Senate. Of these 30 sites, 09 were webpages of conservative churches (01

Catholic and 08 Evangelical) and 08 sites of inclusive groups (01 Catholic and 07 Evangelical). The 13 remaining sites convey discourses and conservative religious values, consisting of 03 Catholic groups and 10 Evangelical interdenominational initiatives. Therefore, in the general corpus of 30 the religious sites we found, there are 22 that are aligned to conservative perspectives on sexual diversity (18 Evangelical and 04 Catholic). The proliferation of these discourses of repudiation was more explicit among Evangelical groups, being that this is a topic more explored and circulated in this religious universe. There seems to be a less intense problematization of homosexuality in Catholic discourses, although some spokespersons identified as Catholic manifest their opinions on Evangelical sites, endorsing or defending the perspectives presented below.

The material collected in the broader research is quite varied, composed of reports, articles, readers' letters, editorials, counseling sessions, forums and *testimonies*.<sup>2</sup> Many of these Internet pages operate as portals of information, publishing news stories related to culture, politics, behavior and religion. Some possess a more explicit institutional proposal, corresponding to associations that act in the pastoral and political spheres with distinct emphases. Some sites are initiatives that present themselves as *ministries of aid* to “counsel people who live with homosexual conflicts” in different parts of the Brazilian Federation. In these, we observe a proliferation of articles exploring the supposed “causes” of homosexuality. This debate is linked to the emergence of the category “psychotheology”, which we will not analyze in this article. It is interesting to just observe the relative porosity of these theological perspectives with regards to certain psychological theories (especially those in relative disuse in the field of psychology) that mobilize negative meanings around homosexuality in a zone of hybridization between these fields. Discussing the “origins” of this form of sexuality can be understood as a sign of a pathologizing vision itself, one that posits some form of heterosexuality as a “norm” and is dedicated to trying to colonize all expressions of sexuality that differ from this convention.

Other pages analyzed are from groups displaying more visceral political discourses, marked by constant opposition to LGBT issues, whether these involve legislation and specific policies, or concern the visibility and social recognition of this population. The statute of one of the organizations mentions its objective of creating, implementing and developing programs to “prevent” homosexuality. Another objective of the group, referred to in this same document, is to “mobilize” at the “national level”, a “movement of awareness and action” with the aim of “guaranteeing the right to support those who

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<sup>2</sup> In this we do not report on the content conveyed by forums, counseling, and testimonies. Forms of virtual interactions were collected at the Church Portals of Grace and the Universal Arch, sites maintained by the International Church of Grace and the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. On these sites, there are specific sessions in which the topic of homosexuality emerges in the form of counseling, debates and forums without an explicit preoccupation with the diffusion of specific doctrinal content. Testimonials appear in several of the evangelical initiatives that we accompanied, corresponding to the biographical narratives sharing experiences that represent “proof” of the action of the power of God in the life of people and are incorporated within pedagogies of sexuality (Duarte, Natividade and Oliveira, 2009).

voluntarily want to leave homosexuality and other sexual dysfunctions/disorders (...)” via the powers of the Legislative, Executive, Judicial and Public Ministry branches of government. Apparently, this group works to create political pressure with the goal of obtaining support for the “therapeutic” activities exercised by the association.

The evangelical religious universe is multifaceted, possessing distinct cosmological and doctrinal emphases. Regardless of origin or the existence of multiple institutional affiliations, however, we observed the constitution of interdenominational networks which formed relative consensus on the meanings of homosexuality. The spokespersons of these networks are pastors, social workers, psychologists, writers, lawyers, “ex-homosexuals” and the coordinators of aid ministries, etc. We observed that the public space was seen as a stage for a confrontation between leaders of religious groups and representatives of social movements, expressed in the tension between the “Law of God” and the “Law of Man”. The subject that most galvanized discourses was the consideration by the Brazilian Senate of the Bill known as PL-122/ 2006. This proposal, popularly known as the “project to criminalize homophobia”, would make discrimination based on sexual orientation a crime.<sup>3</sup>

In the materials collected, we identified a second thematic axis involving a preoccupation with the implementation of specific public policies for homosexuals. Religious groups portray dialogues between social movements, non-governmental organizations, and the State defending the citizenship of sexual minorities as a *dangerous* articulation, propagating “non-Christian values” and disseminating “liberal” and “unacceptable” values. The institution of a national public policy focused on the LGBT population, sexual policies and programs such “Brazil without homophobia” are seen as a motive for preoccupation which calls for a religious response in the defense of religion and the family.

The sites that we analyzed featured articles, news, debates and polls on this subject. Information about PLC 122/ 2006 and models of protest letters are available on these sites to be sent to senators, declaring opposition to the proposal. Alerts against the “dangers” of the anti-homophobic law were constant and recurring. Notable topics included the fear that religious institutions would not be allowed to remove “homosexual ministers”, that court cases to persecute religious people would be introduced and that gay and lesbian adoption of children would be encouraged.

Various websites published news calling upon “netizens” (a contraction of internet citizens) to react to the project through prayers, fasts, vigils, marches, sending e-mails to parliamentarians and signing petitions. According to these sites, the approval of the project which criminalizes homophobia may promote the growing acceptance of

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<sup>3</sup> The bill presented by Iara Bernardes, approved by the Federal Chamber and pending consideration by the Federal Senate, equates the crime of homophobia with the crimes of racism and sexism in the Federal Constitution.

sexual diversity, leading to the “extermination of the heterosexual,” the “destruction of the Brazilian family,” *heterophobic* attitudes, an increase in pedophilia in the country and an increase in the spread of the AIDS epidemic.<sup>4</sup>

A protest against the proposal was organized in the television media. The program *Victory in Christ*, presented by a pastor from the Assemblies of God church and shown on *Rede TV*, created a campaign with the slogan “SAY NO TO PLC-122”. In numerous TV programs, leaders encouraged the audience to reject the project, including “clarifications” to the evangelical population regarding the alleged “harm” the motion would entail to Christian churches. In the discourses circulated on the internet, PLC 122/ 2006 was portrayed as an “attack on life and the family”, transforming a “sin” into a “human right”. An article posted by a Catholic Priest on the VINACC site endorses this last argument. The topics of sin, divine punishment and homosexuality are linked here, encouraging a negative vision of sexual diversity. In this and other articles, the fear of “consequences” is evoked against a growing naturalizing of homosexuality in society.

According to these discourses, the punishment of God that befell the city of Sodom due to the practice of homosexuality could happen to Brazil if Christians did not mobilize to stop the expansion of LGBT citizenship. Such contents were found on the evangelical sites of VINACC and ABRACEH, on the blog of the Support Movement and on the blog of the evangelical writer Júlio Severo. Julio Severo is a figure of some importance in this field. His articles are posted or cited on the internet pages of several of the religious initiatives that we monitored, in addition to having several published books that are widely consumed by conservative religious groups (Natividade, 2008). Some of the collected texts have no explicit author, as their authors choose to remain anonymous or use pseudonyms. Another recurrent theme raised concerns over *cures for homosexuality* and corrective therapies. Many texts expressed the fear that the approval of the bill would obstruct the pastoral activities of sexual “re-orientation” and the proselytizing work of churches in the conversion and “regeneration” of homosexuals.

The political action against this project has extensive capillarity activities. Religious media, associations/entities connected to the pastoral work of homosexuality “reversion”, Catholic priests, lawyers, and an ample gamut of specialists have appeared in public spaces to defend freedom of belief/expression and the right to “preach against homosexuality”.

The expansion of LGBT citizenship is seen as a violation of the rights of so-called “normal” people. State actions in the sphere of management of specific public policies

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<sup>4</sup> Natividade (2008a) analyzes the controversy about cures for homosexuality in Brazil, demonstrating that the arguments sustained by religious people in confrontation with the civil rights of homosexuals spread moral panics associated with the necessity of the “prevention” of sodomy in the country, in response to the growing visibility and recognition of sexual minorities. The fear of the “destruction of heterosexuality” appears alongside fears raised as an argument for the existence of reparative therapies and for pastoral work aimed at the conversion of gays, lesbians and transgender people (Natividade, 2008 a: 250).

are also a target of intense attention. Texts published in the time frame circulated discourses that attributed to then President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva the nickname of “agent of the moral and sexual corruption of youth” for his supposed “endorsement” of “gay causes”, including “sexual education” in schools and the promotion of gender equality. One of the articles postulates the existence of two forms of teaching: the “education of the beast” and the “education of God”. The first is oriented toward secular values, defending equality between men and women and spreading the use of condoms. This is an apology for “promiscuity”, teaching “free sex” to children and adolescents, associated with the expansion of pedophilia and the increase in the number of homosexuals in society. According to this religious discourse, the content of many textbooks professes the “innate” character of sexual orientation and even spreads family models that don’t correspond to the “plan of God”. “God’s education”, in turn, is administered in religious schools or by parents in the domestic space. It “protects” children from “negative influences” that could alienate them from the Christian model of behavior. Education under the aegis of parents, guided by religious principles and without interference from secular institutions and norms, would constitute the only way to avoid “harms” to children in this model. These groups believe that a confluence exists between an “increase in the number of homosexuals” and “occurrences of pedophilia”, mobilizing this association as an argument in the political opposition to the demands of LGBT people. In addition to this, we observed arguments that blame homosexuals for the spread of AIDS and other STDs. According to this logic, PLC 122/ 2006 would also encourage episodes of “heterophobia”.

The category *heterophobia* is invoked by some actors in this field as a figure of language that attempts to invert and subvert the arguments utilized by LGBT activists to denounce practices and discourses that disqualify diversity. We do not need to emphasize that, from a sociological perspective, the notion of *heterophobia* is meaningless, insofar as reported “heterophobic” practices do not obstruct rights, stigmatize, or produce the moral inferiority of others. The discourses denounced as “heterophobic” express demands for fairness for a minority in an objective and subjective position of inferiority. The power to discriminate is not distributed equally in society. The subject of the discriminatory act is maligned by collectivities with a great deal of structure and prestige, reaffirming the superiority of these to the detriment of the social categories that are the targets of discrimination (Elias and Scotson, 2000). The hegemonic perspective that symbolically orders our society places heterosexuality at the top of a structure of *sexual stratification*, giving rise to multiple forms of *erotic injustice* (Rubin, 1989). The relative capacity of articulation achieved by the LGBT movement enables these hierarchies to be perceived as a type of “injustice” and questions them. Sexual prejudice, collectively endorsed up until now, can become an object of denunciation. Sexual minorities demands for forms of sexual diversity to be recognized and respected as equal to heterosexuality could only be perceived as a “relegation” of heterosexual people from the point of view of superior *status* claimed in heterosexist perspectives and discourses.



Some strands of this discourse defend the legitimacy of homophobic reactions, justifying them as a “rational aversion” to acts that are intrinsically “dirty”. Violence against homosexuals and the social reproach they addressed can be justified by the argument that God condemns their sexual practices. More visceral versions of this discourse defend the idea that God “hates” homosexuality. From this point of view, public expression of this aversion is an exercise in the freedom of expression. This moral panic is particularly directed towards gay men.<sup>5</sup>

The naturalization of reactions of “disgust” masks their character as a cultural operation that demarcates the domain of the *pure* and *impure* in an attempt to ensure the integrity of a symbolic system (Douglas, 1976), disguising the political effects of this learned response. Visceral reactions of repudiation to the manifestations of sexual diversity and LGBT visibility could be interpreted as forms of *embodied homophobia* and the discourses that evoke and naturalize them as incitement to homophobia.

The subjects marked as *impure* in these evangelical discourses may even be demonized, evidencing a synergy between sexual intolerance and religious intolerance. An example of this can be found in the article entitled “Goodbye to innocence: Christian manifesto warns against the advance of the defense of pedophilia and of the intimate relationship between homosexual activism and pedophilic movement”. The text suggests the existence of a common agenda between these “movements”, claiming that a portion of the “practitioners of *homosexuality*” supposedly advocate in favor of pedophilia under the power of “demonic influences”. This strategy of discursive production links spiritual possession, Afro-Brazilian ritual practices, sexual orientation and pedophilia, revealing a synergy between religious and sexual intolerance. Defenders sexual minorities rights are not seen as innocent victims, but rather as operators acting in favor of occult, demonic forces embodied in religions of African origin. In these discourses, to obstruct LGBT rights is an attempt to defeat the influence of the Devil on Earth. In this moral crusade, political struggles are inserted into the cosmology of spiritual combat. The theology of spiritual battle has been exhaustively studied by the anthropology of religion. Roughly speaking, it comprises a vision of the world, widely disseminated throughout the Pentecostal evangelical field, in which demons dispute possession of men with God. Studies call attention to the fact that in this cosmology, God and the Devil are present in the daily lives of the believers. The life of the believer is seen as a constant battleground between God and the Devil (Mafra, 2002; Mariz, 1999).

In the print media, the topic of homosexuality also frequently emerges, with controversy over PLC-122/ 2006 once again appearing. In 68 texts discussing questions connected to sexual diversity (materials, signed articles, essays, interviews, letters to the editor), distributed by the *Focus Gospel Magazine*, *Messenger of Peace* newspaper, *The*

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<sup>5</sup> The primary focus is on homosexual practices between men. This can be inferred from the numerous references to male anatomy and the general silence around femininity. Natividade (2006) has already detected this greater cultural attention to the “deviations” of masculine sexuality among evangelical Christians.

*Word* and *Eclésia* Magazine; there are several references to the possible impact of the approval of an anti-homophobia law, including 09 cover stories. Some of the articles focus specifically on the process of the bill while others are “warnings” about its dangers. In July 2008, *The Messenger of Peace* newspaper (edition #1478) published “The President, Christians, Bible and God are sick”. This article discussed the “First National Conference of GLBT Policies”, criticizing the positions taken by the Lula administration in support of GLBT demands. When President Lula defined homophobia as the “most perverse illness impregnated in the head of human beings”, he supposedly offended the churches, engaging in a “frontal attack on the freedom of expression, religious freedom and the ‘Word of God’”. Representatives of the state that “endorse” the “homosexual cause”, funded with “public money”, were understood to be the authors of “liberal” ideas which were unacceptable, given that homosexuality is an “abomination”, a “sin”, an unnatural practice—behavior, in short, condemned by God (*Messenger of Peace*, 1472, December 2007).

*Eclésia* Magazine, edition #121, has a cover story article entitled, “Does religious persecution exist in Brazil?” The text asserts that if the “homophobia law” were to be approved, religious people who disagree with “homosexual behavior” due to their “doctrines”—“irremovable landmarks that must be respected”—could become victims of lawsuits. If enacted, the law would restrict the “freedom to preach that homosexuality is a sin”. This article cites declarations by Senator Marcelo Crivella, connected to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, regarding the direct interference that the approval of PL 122 could have on “people’s daily lives”. Although one of the major “preoccupations” of the Senator was the risk of “restrictions [being placed on] pastoral activities”, he also observed that the new law would “even” allow public displays of affection between homosexual people, re-emphasizing that the bill “intends to combat whoever represses displays of this affection”. The text implies fear of an increase in episodes of public displays of affection between people of the same sex, which are perceived as undesirable attitudes in the public sphere. Although this discourse doesn’t condone the physical assault of LGBT people, the *repression* of visibility seems to be presented as a relatively legitimate behavior.

These positions are expressed in very different documents, including a certain number of “letters from the readers” that are representations of the faithful. In a letter to the newspaper, a reader of *The Messenger of Peace* protests against the Lula administration’s distribution of “sexual booklets” in schools. According to this reader, sexual education would supposedly propagate “foul language” and would negatively affect children. A particularly interesting text is the “Course of Christian Ethics” that rails against “liberal theories and their dissemination in society”, against the spreading of “iniquitous forms of union”, “gay marriage”, “group sex” and married people who “live in separate houses” (*Messenger of Peace*, edition 1473, February 2008).

The discourses analyzed here exemplify some religious responses to the social transformations pertaining to the recognition and legitimacy of LGBT people. They show a network of institutions and religious groups endorsing stereotypes and constructing desires, practices and homosexual orientations as *undesirable differences*. Generally speaking, they intertwine to produce an image of the “homosexual” (and of LGBT people in general) as “dangerous subjects”.

### 3. Purity, Danger and Politics: the construction of the “homosexual threat”

There are many ways in which the figure of the homosexual can be constructed as threatening in these discourses. Representations of purity and impurity, as well as cultural definitions of what is “healthy” or “normal”, may be more or less intertwined with perceptions of the political activities of sexual minorities. One of the stereotypes employed utilizes pathologizing conceptions. The articles employing these conceptions distinguish *healthy* and *natural* behaviors from others perceived as *sick*, suggesting clues to the existence of a particular strand in these discourses that might be understood as a kind of *religious sexuality*. This demarcates the sexual practices permitted by God by the specification of a domain referred to as “abnormal”, “anomalous”, “perverted”, “morbid”, “obscene”, “anti-biblical”, and “anti-natural”. It does not simply postulate vaginal penetrative sex as the only acceptable practice, but in fact enables a discourse regarding a series of “sins” that are, simultaneously, understood as sexuality disorders. Different types of heterosexual behaviors are framed as *practices* that the subject exercises—“incorporated”, embodied, but created by factors that are external to the subject, such as the influence of unstructured families or demons. New domains of “perversion” are also created.

A text that expresses this type of discourse is “The Bible, homosexuality and other eropathies”, authored by minister Antônio Gilberto. The author locates the origin of “homosexuality” and “effeminacy” in childhood. In some passages, he shifts between these two categories, suggesting a correlation between homosexual orientation and the “inversion” of gender. A series of competing factors play out in this discourse in which the boy becomes “predisposed” to “effeminacy” and later becomes an “effeminate adult”. The configuration of his family of origin holds a prominent position in this dynamic. If the young person has a “cruel”, “inhumane” and “tyrannical” mother and an “absent”, “indifferent” and “soft” father, he will develop a “weak personality” and become “faint-hearted”, eventually growing to “detest women”. The “work of Satan” is also highlighted here as relevant factors in the shaping of homosexuality, present in media and in certain children’s programs, in particular, which supposedly encourage premature sexuality.

Here, sexual diversity is represented as a source of danger, associated mainly with the spread of AIDS epidemic. A report from *Messenger of Peace* (Edition # 1478,

July 2008), entitled “WHO admits that the AIDS infection is a feature of homosexual practices” takes up this theme. This article claims that “those who practice sexual acts different from those which God designed will suffer serious consequences”, suggesting that AIDS was one of these consequences: “Data reveals: the HIV epidemic only exists among homosexuals, intravenous drug users and promiscuous people who practice what the Bible calls unnatural sex”. According to the report, information from the World Health Organization reveals that “AIDS is not epidemic among heterosexuals in the world” and that “the epidemic never existed among heterosexuals”.

These discourses in the print and internet media collaborate to the construction of homosexuality as a negatively marked difference. Homosexuals are perceived as promiscuous and dangerous: they corrupt values, and spread illness. They need to be corrected and converted. Even in those variants of this discourse that present an ample list of sexual sins, “homosexuality” occupies a central place (Natividade, 2008). A singular paradox which we have thought much about is that this position addresses the multiplicity of identities associated with the notion of “sexual diversity”, seeking to encompass all of them as expressions of the same type of “practice”. This is fundamentally an attempt to deny these identities their intelligibility and singularity, seeking to recodify all these differences as variants of the “sin” of *homosexuality*. It is at least curious that precisely at the same time when the visibility of identity constructions that are not fully covered by the category “homosexuality” are being amplified in the greater society, this intense Christian discursive production is attempting to reunite all behaviors that diverge from compulsory heterosexuality under a single label. Although some initiatives emerge that segment these so-called “sinful practices”, meanings attributed to *homosexuality* appear to be much more “centripetal” than “centrifugal”, seeking to subsume multiple practices and forms of desire into a single category. The larger part of these rhetorical strategies expresses a relatively explicit repudiation. Certain discourses, however, utilize much more subtle tactics of argumentation which converge in a manner similar to moral judgments.

A cover story of *Gospel Focus Magazine* dealing with PL-122/ 2006 produces a narrative that portrays the *Christian* as a victim of the cruel *homosexual*. In this composition, the principle strategy is to interpolate different social subjects whose statements—properly trimmed and selected—are articulated in such a way to look like the magazine is neutrally approaching the different angles of a debate. By analyzing the ways in which these statements are connected, however, we identify a narrative of religious persecution, perpetrated by the defenders of sexual minorities against Christians. This representation congregates different personages around the roles of *aggressor* and *victim*, serving as a moral fable regarding the dangers raised by the social acceptance of sexual diversity. Let us now examine this article in more depth.

The article is entitled “They want to silence us: the homophobia law may establish a gay dictatorship in Brazil” (edition 75, year 07, October 2007). The article quotes

testimonials of pastors, representatives of conservative Christian groups, members of the evangelical bench, a lawyer, a leader of an inclusive church, a transsexual and a homosexual activist. While the *Messenger of Peace* frankly rejects sexual diversity, *Gospel Focus* presents different angles of the controversy—positioned within a certain perspective, however. Despite the variety of people quoted in the article, it is easy to perceive the position from which the magazine speaks. Although the article puts into play a debate, its central discourse is a presentation of the church and of Christians as persecuted by the “pro-homosexuality movement”.

The article begins by describing a “crisis” that affects churches: PL122/ 2006, presented as a violation of democracy that could establish a *gay dictatorship*. This metaphor of *tyranny*, although not mentioned again in the text, should not be underestimated. A *dictator* sustains his power through the exercise of violence and not as an expression of a collective will. Following this initial establishment of tension, the main spokespeople of the controversy are presented. Out of a total of 19 people invited to express their opinions regarding the debate, 13 construct arguments opposing approval of the bill. The first three to position themselves are minister Silas Malafaia, lawyer Zenóbio Fonseca and Júlio Severo, referred to here as a representative of the “pro-family movement”. In the first statement in which he appears, minister Silas Malafaia occupies a prominent position on the first page, claiming to have received *death threats*. As we continue reading, we discover that these threats have supposedly been uttered by LGBT people and are examples of the aggressive behavior which Malafaia claims as common among *homosexuals*. The next statement is from a lawyer and professor who, indicated as a specialist, affirming the unconstitutionality of PL-122/ 2006 and the intention of its defenders to “criminalize Christianity”. The third character—writer Júlio Severo—appears with only 5 lines, evoking the “noxiousness” of the indirect sanctions upon Christianity that would result from the approval of PL-122/ 2006. Throughout the article, Severo takes up the topic of religious persecution perpetrated by the pro-homosexuality movement, telling *Gospel Focus* that “he remains in hiding in order to protect his family from reprisals”. A series of small acts considered to be violence against the Christian faith and attributed to LGBT people are then presented, composing an image of the defense of the rights of sexual minorities as something exerting different modalities of illegitimate power, ranging from lawsuits to death threats. In this way, discourses which reproduce stigmatizing conceptions of sexual diversity are circulated, constructing it as “dangerous”, “contaminating” and in need of correction, control and subjection.

#### **4. Conclusion: religious power and the production of second-class individuals**

The religious discourses analyzed here show two main strategies of reaction to LGBT recognition and visibility among conservative evangelicals: *welcoming* and *fighting*. There is no contradiction between these fronts and it is possible that they are mutually

reinforcing, reiterating and spreading stigmatizing representations in different spheres. The article analyzed above focused more closely on the dynamics of confrontation, understanding that discourses of *welcoming* and *transformation* can be mobilized within the fight. One of the main emphases in this struggle is the production of a discourse that attributes negative values to sexual diversity, constructing a stereotype of the homosexual as a dangerous individual. This threatening subject incarnates distinct characters: he is aggressive, immoral, uncontrollable, dirty, contaminating and/or a propagator of diseases, a pedophile, a sexual abuser, possessed by demons, and prone to crime. The conjoining of these attributes collaborates in the construction of sexual diversity as a scary phenomenon and its “practitioners” as subjects who should not receive legal protection for their *sins*.

Here, we see a contemporary cultural scenario in which some religious segments find religious answers to the recognition and visibility of LGBT populations. These answers take on the form of an intensification of rejection attitudes, reinforcing the norm of *compulsory heterosexuality*. All expressions of sexuality which put hegemonic standards in check are disqualified. This rhetoric represents the “advancement” of civil rights for gay people as a violation of the rights of the faithful or even as a form of *persecution* and *intolerance* against Christianity.

An apparently less combative aspect of these discourses problematizes the possible *causes* of practices and/or homosexual identities, aiming for their “prevention” and suppression. As Weinberg (1973:18) observed, it is curious that these discourses repeatedly question the origins of homosexuality, but rarely asks how a person becomes “heterosexual”. Attempts to specify the “causes” of homosexuality are guided by the necessity of ensuring the status of normality of heterosexual people, whose hegemony is threatened when confronted with manifestations of sexual diversity.

Weinberg believes that homophobia possesses a peculiar status in light of other fears, as it elects a particular social group as its object of antagonism. It is not an emotional manifestation that simply makes the individual incapable of performing certain activities, by aversion to objects or situations. It ultimately leads to “disdain” and aversion to a certain category of people. This “contempt” reveals a dynamic in the formation of “heterosexual” people who perpetrate homophobic acts or are taken by homophobic thoughts and sensations. These are contrasting operations of self-valorization which function through the debasement of the other. The abject subject is also, at the same time, understood as threatening due to his potential for corroding the values the homophobic subject seeks to cultivate (Weinberg, 1973: 15).

Weinberg’s insight regarding valorizing oneself through the disqualification of others can inspire an understanding of the recent tensions between conservative evangelicals and sexual minorities. The discourses analyzed above *affirm the moral superiority of heterosexuality by disseminating* negative stereotypes regarding LGBT people;

by generating scandal in the face of public expressions of affection engaged in by these subject; by obstructing demands for rights; and by the recourse to a subtle form of hygienism and subjection. The agents employing and propagating these discourses are evangelical ministers.

Commenting on links between the management of repressed homosexuality and relations of subordination, Eribon (2008) can help in the interpretation of the dynamics underpinning forms of religious homophobia. This author discusses the games of concealment and visibility of gay identity in modernity and their relation to *injurious speech*—an act of speech that simultaneously promotes violence and the constitution of the subject it victimizes. Accusations of homosexuality—an attribute considered to be socially stigmatizing—situate the subject, who recognizes himself in the injurious speech, is characterized by it, and by the strategies of concealment, denial, or neutralization of the stigma of homosexuality. To have to guard one's sexuality as a secret places the subject in the position of being an object of the discourse of Others, under permanent risk of being exposed. However, the moment that the "object" of injury decides to speak about it, assuming publicly the injury as part of his or her identity and questioning the negative moral burden that is attributed to him, a partial reversion of the relationship between the heterosexual subject who speaks and the homosexual Other occurs:

When the homosexual says that he is homosexual, the heterosexual is obligated to think of himself as heterosexual, even though up until that point he never had to ask questions about his identity or the social order in which it is instituted. He is in a state of absolute privilege. For this reason, he is indignant when he is threatened with losing it, even partially, and he asks *gay* people to return to "discretion"; that is, to permit him to return to the peace of his certainties, to the comfort of his normalcy, which rests upon the silence of others. Or, still more simply, the heterosexual considers that the homosexual behaves badly, exaggerates, "exhibits himself", provokes...So, the homosexual can only be the object of discourse and becomes unbearable as soon as he attempts to become a subject (Eribon, 2008: 73).

Heterosexuality enjoys the privilege of being un-marked. This type of discourse presents the revelation of the singular cultural construction of heterosexuality as a model and universal norm, an expression of divine designs which confuses its own particular identity with that of humanity—in short, taking the part for the whole. To be obligated to recognize the existence of people different from oneself and to be forced to understand that this difference is not synonymous with inferiority or abnormality is a source of discomfort for these subjects in that it destabilizes the certainties that support their perception of the world and of themselves.

In these religious groups, the position of being non-marked emerges as a result of the belief that the "love of Christ" is accessible to all and that everyone should

accept it. Cultural differences that characterize groups should be dissolved within a homogeneous humanity living strictly under biblical precepts. This religion—absolutist in its pretensions—is faced with the particularism of LGBT identities. Confrontations with subjects who do not wish to erase their differences by managing a secret or by employing the religious/psychological techniques of producing heterosexuality can be particularly uncomfortable for evangelicals who consider the uses they make of their bodies regarding sexuality and gender are the only legitimate ones permitted by God. The slight destabilization occasioned by the questioning of this position of subject, by calling into question the universality of the values sustained by it, can imbue LGBT identities with a threatening aspect. Disassociation between “homosexual acts” and the person that practices them makes possible the resumption of the claim that all humanity is aggregated within a model of gender and sexuality grounded in a biblical interpretation. All those who want to be *saved* can be *helped* and *rescued* from the *sin of homosexuality*. This particular form of homophobia (which we do not explore in this article, but which is characterized as a posture of *care* and *aid*) does not necessarily or explicitly spread prejudice. We need to ask ourselves, however, to what extent it signals a capillary action which mobilizes fear and produces negative stereotypes about homosexuality.

The notion of *moral panic* deserves some theoretical commentary. Cohen (1972) used this expression to account for the exaggerated reactions of the media, public opinion and agencies of social control when faced with small “deviations” of social norms regarded as extremely threatening phenomena. Later, “moral panics” about sexuality came to be conceived as forms of the regulation of sexuality involving intense, uninterrupted and not always visible disputes revolving around norms of sexual conduct (Watney, 1997). A “moral panic” represents a local intensification of diffuse regulation of the social body. This approach can be particularly profitable for reflection upon the synergy between religious discourses and daily mechanisms of control of behavior. We note the relations which exist between homophobia and *compulsory heterosexuality*. Collective fear in the face of manifestations of sexual diversity is created by the exposure of loopholes and internal ambiguities of the heterosexual norm, revealing its character as a cultural convention and dislocating its social place in this process.

In the religious discourse that we have analyzed, the strategies for the diffusion of stereotypes and the network of activities engaged in to obstruct LGBT demands are exaggerated reactions of panic, reacting to the perception of a intensified LGBT visibility? Do these discourses promote a reactivation of stereotypes of homosexuality that were widespread at the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic? Together with a reinvention of images of the homosexual as a “threat to collective health” and of illness as a *divine punishment*, some representations seem to emerge from this process with a different color. They promote associations between homosexuality and pedophilia, portraying articulations between the state and LGBT activism as threats to Christian “values” and to the idealized family model. These stereotypes seem, in fact, to represent



forms of confrontation with disturbing differences that must be negated and debased in order to preserve the pretensions of *status* and purity claimed by Christian religious discourses.

To quote an expression by the anthropologist Henrietta Moore (2000), one could say that the visibility and political mobilization of sexual minorities threatens, effectively, the *fantasies of power* and the *fantasies of identity* cultivated by these Christians. These religious discourses seek to orchestrate consensus in defense of values that, according to their point of view, should be universally accepted. This is in defense of exclusive privileges that are conceded to a hegemonic group of people to whom the identity of “heterosexual” is attributed in detriment to sexual and reproductive rights of the LGBT minority. Ultimately, we are talking about a large set of privileges restricted to heterosexuals and which range from the right to public displays of affection to the possibility of joint adoption of children by same-sex couples. Confrontation of the advances of the LGBT movement in the public sphere and suppression of *homosexuality* in the private sphere are intertwined with processes of production and diffusion of negative stereotypes regarding sexual diversity. Conservative resistance is galvanized around religious justifications, evidencing an attempt to silence sexual minorities who are increasingly finding a voice in the public sphere and demanding recognition and equality.

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