

# Gender, sexuality and religious instruction in Brazilian educational policy\*

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## Abstract

In this article, we address the historical role of Catholic Church, as well as that of other religions, in the field of religious education in Brazil. Then, we discuss the meaning of the Evangelical rise in the intertwining of State policy, moral entrepreneurship, and sexual panics, in disputes involving sexual politics in school education. We draw attention to the complexity of these issues while facing the current challenge of producing a pluralist approach to sexuality in education.

**Keywords:** Conservatism, Education, Sexuality, Gender, Religious education.

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Brazil is once again experiencing heightened debates and antagonisms concerning, on the one hand, the constitutionally guaranteed inclusion of religious education in public schools and, on the other, the controversial inclusion of gender and sexual diversity issues in the regulatory framework, standards, policies, and the everyday life of public education. Education is one particular space where the moral disputes that signals the tensions between politics and religion, arising from different understandings and appropriations of the secularization process, and different views on secularism in a democratic State (Casanova, 1994), are most acute, producing panics and mobilizations all over the country. The subject of the educational process is defined as a child or an adolescent. Despite the current constitutional framework, which promotes a view of children and adolescents as citizens entitled to rights, the controversies regarding gender and sexuality in schools mobilize a common sense view that defines them as essentially vulnerable and imagines them as primordially moldable, particularly permeable to a diversity of values, at times edifying, at times corrupting, from which society and the State must protect them, while simultaneously teaching them to become good citizens.

Within the educational policy arena, the inclusion of discussions of gender and sexuality in the school curriculum has been met with a fierce conservative resistance, and served as a privileged stage for a contention articulated to the historical dispute surrounding the role of religious actors in public education in different countries. In Brazil, on the one hand, the Catholic Church and some Evangelical leaders, generally associated with a Christian “congressional bloc” (some important exceptions are the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, and the Assembly of God—Madureira Ministry), currently promote the confessional interpretation of “religious education”, defined as “optional” by the 1988 Constitution. They thus promote educational resources that reinterpret Christian values from a perspective that defines cultural, religious, sexual, gender, and even bodily diversity, as a “problem” and a controversial subject, requiring them to take a

morally Christian stance. On the other hand, those groups have systematically blocked federal initiatives against homophobia in schools and, more recently, have organized campaigns against “gender ideology”, in order to contain the discussion of gender and sexual diversity in the school curriculum.

In this article, based on a review of the Brazilian literature on the subject, we will first focus on the Catholic Church’s historical trajectory as a hegemonic presence, as well as on the role of other religions in the educational arena. We will then address two manifestations of the conservative religious investment in the imposition of their moral precepts onto public education: on the one hand, their ‘positive’ influence, in the sense of promoting and diffusing their own values; and, on the other hand, the current heightening of the clash between conservative religious activism and minority perspectives, in the form of ‘negative’ actions by the former, seeking to curb, restrict and delegitimize values they perceive as antagonistic. By addressing how State politics, moral entrepreneurship and sexual panics are intertwined in the disputes over, and changes in, official discourse (fashioned in legislation and government policy) regarding religious education and sexual politics in education, we seek to draw attention to the complexity of these issues while facing the current challenge of producing a pluralist approach to sexuality in education.

### **Religious education**

Brazilian history is riddled with changes back and forth when it comes to the secularization of public education. Soon after independence, in 1822, the Brazilian Empire inherited from Portugal the *Padroado* (patronage) system, which maintained Catholicism as the State religion. Consequently, Catholic doctrine was officially present in public school curricula, while teachers were forced to profess the Catholic faith. This situation lasted until the final decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the relationship between the Catholic Church and the State was redefined as new conflicts emerged, something that also contributed to the fall of the

monarchy. After the proclamation of the Republic, in 1889, the State was officially separated from the Catholic Church. The State was forbidden from financing any kind of religious activity and religious education was removed from public schools (Giumbelli, 2006; Cunha, 2014).

Nonetheless, according to Cunha (2014), the political crisis of the 1920s would end, in practice, the Republic's laicism, as a result of the construction of an informal alliance between the Catholic Church and the State, modeled after fascist Italy.<sup>1</sup> It was then, during the provisional government of the early 1930s, after four decades of secular education, "Religious Instruction" was reintroduced – through broad educational reforms – into public schools. This was intensified by the strong participation of the Catholic Electoral League in promulgating the 1934 Constitution, which introduced the possibility of an association between the State and religious organizations into the constitutional text. All Republican constitutions, starting with that of the "New State" (Estado Novo), would come to include religious education as an "optional" part of the public-school curriculum – that is, in addition to not being mandatory, its contents would also not be set according to particular religious denominations (Giumbelli; Carneiro, 2006; Cunha, 2004).

Religious education remained practically unquestioned until at least the 1946 Constituent Assembly. However, despite the reluctance of some parties and congress members (both socialist and liberal), the Catholic Church retained its hegemony during the constituent period, obtaining majority support for its historical demands. Between the years of 1948 and 1960, education gained prominence in the public debate, mobilizing diverse political forces. In 1948, following Catholic directions regarding religious education, the first National Educational Standards Law (LDB, in Portuguese) were approved, and continued to be reformulated

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<sup>1</sup> "Faced with worker strikes, which were unprecedented in the country, and the military uprisings against the agrarian oligarchy, religious education came to be prescribed as an antidote to the 'social and political disorder'" (Cunha 2014:7-8)

over the following years. This did not prevent the controversy from generating new ramifications, such as, in the 1950s, the confrontation between liberal educator and defender of laic education Anísio Teixeira and the defenders of the then so-called “educational freedom”, publicly represented by the priest and congress member Fonseca e Silva. Among Teixeira’s opposition, in addition to Fonseca e Silva, was the conservative Catholic journalist Gustavo Corção, who claimed to oppose what he termed the “State monopoly over education”, to the detriment of the church and of individual families. In this polarized setting, the defense of a secularist stands on educational policy came to be immediately associated with a communist and atheist tactic of combating the religious majority (Cunha; Fernandes, 2012; Cunha, 2014).

One of the issues discussed in the discussions and drafts of the LDB in the early 1950s was the control of the curricular track on “religious education” by religious institutions – a clear aspiration of the Catholic Church –, which would then be responsible for authorizing individuals to teach it, regardless of whether or not they had trained or acted as teachers.<sup>2</sup> However, Catholics were not alone in demanding institutional control over religious education. In 1956, Baptist Congress Member Antunes de Oliveira introduced a substitutive bill that sought to increase the purview of religious authorities. In addition to registering teachers, those authorities would also become responsible for drafting the courses’ programs—without attacking other faiths. However, as Cunha and Fernandes (2012:859) point out regarding this bill,

Despite seeking to strengthen the power of religious institutions, the grounds of the proposal by the representative of the State of Amazonas contained a paragraph that highlighted the curricular track’s effectively optional status, since it offered non-confessional alternatives to schools and students: ‘The establishments that so prefer,

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<sup>2</sup> This point returns later and remains part of the debate to this day, as we will see below.

after hearing all students or parents equally, are entitled to choose the impartial study of the history of religions and notions of compared religions, especially from an ethical perspective.

What is also clear in the positions taken by Spiritists and Protestants, beyond their obvious differences, are the precautions taken against the exercise of discrimination by clergy members and followers of the majority religion in the direction and implementation of religious education in schools. The Spiritists' arguments in the declaration "Spiritists and the public school", regarding the then-controversial issue of marital separation, are worthy of note. Item VI establishes the "Institution of legal penalties for any form of discrimination in public and private schools, including that related to parents' marital status" (Spiritists, *apud* Cunha and Fernandes, 2012:858). As Cunha and Fernandes (2012) note, this item contains an important element in its historical context, since it reflected the controversy surrounding marital separation in the country, and the recurring position of Catholic schools, which took or dismissed students based on their parents' marital status.

Cunha and Fernandes (2012) raise another important issue with regard to the political negotiations surrounding religious education at the time when the LDB was under consideration, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. According to the authors, the lack of State funding for religious education resulted from an amendment introduced by Aurélio Vianna (PSB-AL). Thus, public schools would not be allowed to assign funding to hire religious education faculty or, ultimately, to assign regular faculty to religious education related activities during their working hours – a truly remarkable turn, since the subject had been widely debated in the 1946 National Constituent Assembly and, at the time, all attempts to restrict the use of the public education system or State funding for religious dissemination (as had previously happened in the 1934 Constitution) had been defeated. The limiting clause introduced by Vianna in 1959, in its turn, was approved with no

great alarm and remained untouched in subsequent versions of the project.

The hypothesis raised by the authors (Cunha; Fernandes, 2012; Cunha, 2014) for this version of the LDB, approved under the João Goulart administration, points to a political agreement between the left and the right, in which the restricting clause served as a sort of compensation offered by the defenders of religious education for the support provided by left-wing sectors to issues of their “educational freedom” platform. However, if, in 1960, when the LDB was approved, the defenders of confessional religious education had to yield on State funding in order to have their platform approved, only a few years later they were able to completely turn the tables in their favor. After the military coup, the restrictive clause was removed by a law approved, earmarked as urgent on the eve of Pope John Paul II’s visit to Brazil. Although the 1967 Constitution maintained the prohibition against State funding for religious education, the new LDB, approved in 1971, at the height of the dictatorship, revoked the 1961 LDB’s article banning the State from hiring religious education faculty. Since the legislation became omissive on that issue, Catholic leaders began to hound governors and mayors into assigning public school teachers to religious education positions, as well as into hiring their own agents – after all, the 1971 LDB defined religious education as confessional, therefore a responsibility of the interested churches (Bortoleto; Menegheti, 2010; Cunha; Fernandes, 2012; Cunha, 2014).

During the democratic transition, with the process of drafting a new Constitution, public discussions in favor of fully secularizing public education reemerged, as well as the reaffirmation of religious education, as already present in schools. Among the defenders of a laic public school were the Brazilian Society for the Advancement of Science (SBPC, in Portuguese) and many of its affiliate associations. On the other side were a majority of congress members and voters, who supported popular amendments promoted by religious organizations. Protestants were divided into two groups: one that insisted on the defense of the laic school and another which allied itself with the Catholics and demanded to be

present in school curricula. The inclusion of religious education in the new, democratic Constitution was largely made possible by a Christian lobby, especially that of the Catholic Church, beginning with the constituent process of 1987/1988 (Dickie; Lui, 2007; Cunha, 2014).<sup>3</sup>

The mobilization surrounding the issue then reemerged in 1996. Despite secularists' defeat in the 1988 constituent process, and despite pressure from the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB, in Portuguese), the new LDB approved in 1996 reincorporated the proviso stipulating that religious education should be offered "with no onus to the State budget", as the 1961 version of the law had defined. Additionally, an unprecedented alternative figured in the LDB-96, in comparison to the preceding legislation: unlike previous versions, the new LDB introduced the possibility that religious education could either be offered in the confessional modality, according to the religious preferences of students or their parents, or in the interfaith modality, in which there would be an agreement between the different religious organizations responsible for formulating the curriculum. In the first alternative, religious teachers or advisors would be trained or accredited by the respective religious organizations. According to Cunha (2014), that language ("with no onus to the State budget") did not last long, as, in the ceremony in which the bill was signed into law, president Fernando Henrique Cardoso himself suggested that the prohibition against paying religious education teachers be

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<sup>3</sup> "This lobby took place beginning with the National Constituent Assembly period, when organizations such as the Curitiba Interfaith Education Association (ASSINTEC, in Portuguese), from Paraná, the Council of Churches for Religious Education (CIER, in Portuguese), from Santa Catarina, the Pastoral Institute of Campo Grande, Mato Grosso (IRPAMAT, in Portuguese) and the CNBB Education Sector, especially the National Reflection Group on Religious Education (GRERE) took over negotiations, legitimated by state coordinators of religious education from states where it was already regulated" (Dickie; Lui, 2007:239). Later, the National Council of Christian Churches (CONIC, in Portuguese) joined this group. For more, see Dickie and Lui (2007).



suppressed, thus giving into CNBB's demands (Cunha, 2014; 2016).<sup>4</sup>

The 34<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the CNBB, in April 1996, whose main focus was the Pope's visit, included in its agenda a discussion of the LDB. One consequence of this meeting was the approval of the "Declaration on religious education in public schools", of April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1996. The demands raised in that meeting sought to show Catholic leaders' efficacy in acting upon the Brazilian State. Religious education in public schools and its support and funding by the federal government was an important issue within that broader agenda. Later on, they also articulated a lobby against article 33 of the 1996 LDB, which established that religious education should take place "with no onus to the State budget" (Cunha, 2016).

However, the agenda of religious education and its institutionalization was already relevant since 1995, when the Permanent National Forum of Religious Education (FONAPER, in Portuguese) was created. FONAPER is a non-governmental organization originating in CNBB's National Reflection Group on Religious Education. It was conceived during the National Religious Education Meetings, also promoted by CNBB.<sup>5</sup> It was

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<sup>4</sup> In his official speech at the solemn ceremony when the bill was signed into law, Fernando Henrique Cardoso explicitly mentioned this point, stating: "There are problems. Paulo Roberto mentioned one of which I only became aware yesterday: the complex issue, not of religious education, which has to exist, it is ensured by the Constitution, it is optional, but of defining up to what point should the State have the onus of paying for this education and how to do so, given the plurality of religions that exist in Brazil. We pondered this issue, in a rush, but harshly, because we know we must provide a solution. As it is, this solution has not been provided, which must be given while respecting the plurality and ecumenical nature, so to speak, of our inspiration when it comes to religions; and also meeting the concrete conditions of the existing regional differences" (Cardoso, 1996:704, apud Cunha, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> "It is worth remembering that FONAPER organization, installation and coordination staff members were always, in their majority, from groups connected with Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church. This explains why its leadership was held, at some points, by individuals connected with CNBB advisors and, at the same time, the Forum's own coordination, thus seeking to

created during celebrations of the Council of Churches for Religious Education (CIER/SC, in Portuguese) – whose name was changed to Interfaith Council for Religious Education – 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in September 1995. The main demands stated in an open letter issued by the Forum the following year focused on the inclusion of the religious education curriculum proposal into the Ministry of Education’s National Curriculum Standards (PCN, in Portuguese); the Ministry-recognized qualifications for teaching religious education; and the use of public funds in enforcing the law. The substitute draft of the LDB-96, proposed by the then-Education Minister Paulo Renato Souza himself, was appreciated in Congress in regime of urgency. Reaffirming a proposal already made by the president in his speech at the signing ceremony, the minister claimed that the best solution was that adopted by the state of Paraná, where the State had already hired religion teachers who offered students an ecumenical education. The substitutive draft—whose formulation was based on the Paraná model as a result of the understanding reached between the Ministry of Education and church representatives at a hearing held by the Ministry to define new rules for religious education in public schools – was then approved with broad support by the House of Representatives and the Senate (Dickie; Lui, 2007; Figueiredo, 2010; Pozzer, 2010; Cunha, 2014; Cunha, 2016).

President Fernando Henrique Cardoso signed the new version of the LDB into law in 1997, two months before Pope John Paul II visited Brazil for a second time. In its new version, religious education was defined as an “integral part of basic education for citizenship,” to be taught within the regular school hours of primary public schools (as determined by article 210 of the 1988 Constitution). Additionally, the new version recognized religious power of religious organizations’ in formulating their respective

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maintain a discourse that translated both institutions’ thinking. Within both organizations, CNBB and FONAPER, the same social actors were faced with the difficulty of defending positions of both and wound up opting for their own ideas” (Figueiredo, 2010:23).

programs for the discipline. Beyond eliminating the restriction on using public funds, the new law also removed mentions to interfaith instruction as an expressly recognized modality of religious education. In this version of the 1997 substitutive bill,<sup>6</sup> the State is responsible for hiring teachers (with hiring criteria being defined by each state), proselytism in religious education is banned, and Education Secretariats must hear civil organizations “formed by the various religious denominations in order to define the contents of religious education”. Over the course of 1996 and 1997, due to the exclusion of religious education from the PCN, FONAPER came to formulate the National Religious Education Standards (PCNER). In 1998, the discipline was included as an area of knowledge in the National Curriculum Guidelines, under the name “Religious Education”. In that context, FONAPER promoted the creation, in many states, of Religious Education Councils (Coner, in Portuguese), to fulfill the role of “civil organizations” defined by law as advisors to Education Secretariats in formulating the content of religious education (Dickie; Lui, 2007; Lionço; Diniz, 2010; Bortoleto e Menegheti, 2010; Figueiredo, 2010; Silva; Holmes, 2010; Cunha, 2014; 2016).

These changes led to new controversies, still ongoing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, regarding the contents and practices of religious education, as well as its scope in reaching primary public schools (albeit “optionally”), as stated in the current Constitution.

Since the new law did not determine guidelines for the local implementation of religious education, state school systems began to discuss and legislate independently on the matter, according to the interests, political configurations and power dynamics of regional actors. Consequently, and despite broader federal guidelines, this gave rise to the proliferation of a highly diversified set of laws and teaching practices. In the process of regulating the application of federal law, each state took on a specific ideological and institutional configuration, and some, as previously alluded to,

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<sup>6</sup> The person tasked with reporting on Law n. 9,475/1997, which altered the LDB, was then-Representative Father Roque Zimmermann (PT/PR).

became “models” of practices and norms to be followed. That is, in practice, each state adopted its own standards and norms regarding religious education, producing different and even radically opposing realities. Rio de Janeiro is a paradigmatic case that gained national visibility due to its “option” for confessional religious education in public schools.

São Paulo, where religious education was regulated and put into practice in 2001, exemplifies another way of implementing the law. According to a decision by the State Council on Education, religious education teachers would need to have undergraduate degrees in social sciences, philosophy or history. It was also determined that the contents of teacher training materials would be produced by the Graduate Program in History at State University of Campinas (Unicamp). Lastly, the subject was to be offered in periods within regular school hours only in the final grades of secondary education. In earlier grades, it was to be addressed by the teachers responsible for each class, as “transversal subject” by the state legislation. According to the State Council on Education and the Education Secretariat, religion should be taught without excluding any faith, in a non-confessional, non-proselytist manner, and its main organizing theme would be the “history of religions”. This interpretation has been challenged by the state’s Association of Religious Education Teachers (ASPER-SP, in Portuguese), which considered “history of religions” approach a distortion of the definition of religious education as non-confessional, non-proselytist. To ASPER, that was not the way FONAPER and CONER/SP understood that the subject should be taught (Dickie; Lui, 2007).

Santa Catarina and Rio de Janeiro, in turn, represent completely different approaches. In Santa Catarina, religious institutions and clergy members played a far greater role in the process of interpreting and implementing the law. When the LDB was approved, the state already had a Council of Churches for Religious Education (CIER, in Portuguese), mainly comprising representatives of Christian churches, with an ecumenical perspective, but with a Catholic hegemony. This implementation

was the result of a joint action between different religions (though mostly Christian, especially Catholic, denominations), which provided the discipline with more of an interfaith character, in which supra-confessional spiritual “values” are highlighted – a position aligned with that of FONAPER, whose headquarters are in Santa Catarina. Santa Catarina was also the first state to implement teacher training programs in Religion Sciences, after LDB-97 was signed into law (Dickie; Lui, 2010; Giumbelli; Carneiro, 2006).

Rio de Janeiro is the state that contrasts most radically with São Paulo. In September 2000, then-governor Antony Garotinho was to enact Law n. 3,459, which established the implementation of religious education in Rio de Janeiro public schools. The first bill submitted to the Rio de Janeiro State Legislature regarding religious education post-LDB-97 promoted confessional religious education and ran counter to discussions promoted by FONAPER and similar organizations and movements. Introduced in 1999, it was written by State Legislature Member Carlos Dias, who had public ties to Catholic Church members, who supported the drafting of the bill. Despite pushbacks, the bill was approved the following year. The debate surrounding the bill in the State Legislature opposed those who defended an interfaith approach to those who defended confessional religious education. The only staunch support for a confessional education came from the Rio de Janeiro Archdiocese. The Union of Rio de Janeiro State Spiritist Societies, in turn, took a public stance against the confessional model. Finally, the role of Evangelical Christians merits discussion. In the first place, because there was resistance to the confessional model from some leaders of historical protestant churches, such as the Lutheran Church, which considered this model a threat to the secular State, a position historically adopted by the church. But most Evangelical State Legislature members were also opposed to the confessional bill, and supported its interfaith alternative, which wound up victorious in the State Legislature. The version ultimately approved by the State Legislature was not signed into

law only because of a veto by then-Governor Roseane Garotinho (Giumbelli; Carneiro, 2004; Giumbelli; Carneiro, 2006; Cavaliere, 2007).

The Rio de Janeiro bill underwent some changes, but ultimately maintained confessionalism as its main feature. In this modality, teachers and contents are specific to each religion, and both teacher accreditation and curricula fall under the purview of religious authorities. Despite the prohibition proselytism, religious pluralism is subject to student demand and teacher availability, in turn subject to state hiring. Additionally, with Law n. 3,459, the requirement state schools should offer religious education was expanded to the entirety of basic education, including professional and special education, no longer restricted to primary schools, as established by the LDB. In order to put the new standards into practice, the state of Rio de Janeiro opened a selection process to hire 500 religious education teachers, divided into three segments according to candidates' religious affiliation: "Catholics", "Evangelicals" and "other faiths". Specifically, the selection process assigned 342 positions to Catholics, 132 to Evangelicals and 26 to other faiths (Giumbelli; Carneiro, 2006; Cavaliere, 2007).<sup>7</sup>

That same year, the National Confederation of Education Professionals (CNTE, in Portuguese) challenged the implementation of a confessional approach to religious education by the state of Rio de Janeiro, filing the Direct Motion of Unconstitutionality (ADI, in Portuguese) n. 3,268. The motion, filed to the Brazilian Supreme Court (STF, in Portuguese) by the CNTE (also supported by Conectas-Direitos Humanos NGO and the Institute for Bioethics, Human Rights and Gender – ANIS), stated

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<sup>7</sup> According to Cavaliere (2007:305), this distribution was based on a statistical study previously carried out by the Rio de Janeiro State Education Secretary. We must then consider what were the bases of this study and what is its legitimacy, since it reifies a static notion of religion/religiosity, solely based on a supposed numerical criterion of "representation". As Cavaliere's (2006; 2007) studies suggest, a Christian notion of religion prevails in religious education, even in interfaith approaches. Afro-Brazilian religions, for example, are often silenced or implicitly reproached—often leading to episodes of intolerant behavior between students and between teachers and students.

that the Rio de Janeiro State Law n. 3,459/2000 was flagrantly unconstitutional at establishing confessional religious education, and authorizing religious authorities to define the contents to be taught in classrooms (...) (ADI n. 3,268:18). The ADI also claimed that the law exceeded the terms established by the LDB in extending religious education to all levels of basic education, and enabling religious organizations to interfere with the professional career of civil servants: one of the prerequisites for applying to a religious teacher position was to be accredited by a specific faith, which violated the principle of separation between State and religion (Cavaliere, 2007).

At the same time, the motion raised the thorny issue of mandatory teacher accreditation by authorities of specific religions:

Thus, confessional religious education, as established by State Law, comes into direct conflict with article 210, caput, of the Federal Constitution, as article 2 of the law, in determining prior accreditation by a **religious authority** as a criterion for teaching the subject in the Official Network of State Schools, [and] disrespects the plurality of cultural values of a religious nature that the previously-cited constitutional article sought to protect. (...) Thus, the disrespect toward *cultural values* of a religious nature included in article 210 of the Constitution by the articles 2, II and 3 of Rio de Janeiro State Law n. 3,459/2000 can be verified to the extent that several religious segments of Evangelical, Spiritist and African-Brazilian origin have no concept of **religious authority**, as they do not possess the same hierarchical and administrative structure found in other secular institutions, such as the Catholic and Presbyterian churches, or in Jewish institutions, to name a few examples (ADI n. 3,268:20, emphasis in the original).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Article 210 of the Constitution, in addition to specifically classifying “religious education” as an optional subject, to be taught within the regular school hours in primary public schools, also guarantees, more broadly, that “minimum contents will be determined for primary education, in order to ensure a common basic instruction and respect toward regional and national cultural and artistic values”

A new visit by the Pope and the signing of a new agreement between the Brazilian State and the Catholic Church brought new elements that contributed to the future ramifications of this controversy. Pope Benedict XVI visited Brazil in 2008. That event was crucial to the establishment of a concordat between the Brazilian State and the Vatican—a strategic move to confront the growing and active Evangelical sector in the country. Signed in 2008 by the Brazilian Foreign Affairs Minister and the Vatican’s Secretary of State, the concordat was ratified by Congress and enacted via decree by then-President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva. The officially-titled “Agreement between the Federative Republic of Brazil and the Holy See regarding the Legal Status of the Catholic Church in Brazil” granted Catholic institutions special political, fiscal, labor and educational rights. Nonetheless, the agreement’s diplomatic success was not without opposition from diverse actors such as religious leaders, politicians, activists, intellectuals, among others (Giumbelli, 2008; Cunha, 2009; Vital; Lopes, 2013).<sup>9</sup>

Since it also addressed religious education in public schools, in support of the confessional model, both religious and non-religious actors took a public stance on the bilateral agreement regarding those contents. Among the effects of this controversy is another Direct Motion of Unconstitutionality. The new ADI, with

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[[https://www.senado.gov.br/atividade/const/con1988/CON1988\\_05.10.1988/art\\_210\\_.asp](https://www.senado.gov.br/atividade/const/con1988/CON1988_05.10.1988/art_210_.asp) – accessed on: Oct. 21 2017].

<sup>9</sup> In late 2009, when the concordat had already been approved by the Senate and was awaiting presidential undersigning to go into effect, a diverse set of “civil society” organizations made public statements against it: Educational Action, Brazilian Anthropology Association, Brazilian Atheist and Agnostic Association, Brazilian Association in Defense of a Secular State, Brazilian Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transvestite and Transsexual Association, Brazilian Association for Religious Freedom and Citizenship, Brazilian Association of Umbanda Temples, Association of Brazilian Judges, Piauí Association of Evangelical Pastors, Catholics for the Right to Choose, Regional Council of Social Workers/SP, State Forum for the Defense of the Rights of the Child and Adolescents – SP, Official Education Teachers Union of the State of São Paulo, the São Paulo Superior Organization of Umbanda, among others.



the number 4,439, was filed by the Attorney General in July 2010, directly citing the Brazil-Holy See agreement. Claiming that confessional religious education was unconstitutional, the ADI proposed to ban the hiring of teachers as representatives of religions. This proposed interpretation of the law focused precisely on the possibility that a specific article of the agreement be considered unconstitutional: the one endorsing the confessional model of religious education from the perspective of “Catholicism and other religions”.<sup>10</sup> In addition to this, the ADI also took a stance against other variations, such as the “ecumenical” or “interfaith” model of religious education.<sup>11</sup> For that, it refers to the book organized by Debora Diniz and Tatiana Lionço (2010), “Secularism and religious education in Brazil”, in which the authors argue that there is a conceptual ambiguity in these models of education, since all religious education is confessional in its bases. Furthermore, the consensus between religions presupposed by the interfaith modality would work strategically for the hegemony of Christian religions in the country.

In that same book, Diniz and Lionço also analyze part of the teaching material available for religious education in Brazil. The authors conclude that there is a general refusal to acknowledge diversity in the country, whether religious or otherwise. Through specific rhetorical devices, the material tends to incite a “Christian ethnocentrism”, establishing a clear difference in how each religion is represented. Another discursive strategy present in the material is the silencing of diversity,<sup>12</sup> if not an attempt to deconstruct it.

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<sup>10</sup> See ADI n. 4,439. The ADI can be examined in its entirety at: <http://www.edulaica.net.br/artigo/30/legislacao/concordata-brasilvaticano/dimensao-juridica/acao-de-inconstitucionalidade-da-concordata/>

<sup>11</sup> “(...) as this model, though not intended to promote a specific faith, seeks to inculcate students with religious principles and values shared by the majority, to the detriment of atheist and agnostic views, as well as those from religions with less power in the social-political sphere” (ADI n. 4,439). See full reference in footnote above.

<sup>12</sup> On the silence surrounding sexual diversity and homophobia in books distributed by the National Book Program, see Lionço and Diniz (2009).

Thus, the material's argumentative ambitions go way beyond religious education in its strict sense, seeking to intervene in science education as well. This is the case of biology, through the contrast between evolutionism and creationism, as well as the controversy regarding the beginning of life. In addition to the clear opposition to atheism and to the existence of non-religious scientists, the materials also contribute to the marginalization of minorities, such as people with disabilities and LGBT individuals.

As Diniz and Lionço (2010:73-74) point out, the issue of sexual diversity is completely silenced in primary education materials and only appears in secondary education books. At that level, it is addressed through a narrative strategy that reductively opposes two conflicting perspectives: the "liberal" thesis and the "Christian" or "Catholic" thesis. In one of the books, homosexuality is addressed more explicitly, described as a "moral deviation" and a "physical and psychological illness". In this view, "homosexuality is not natural" because it does not present "gender in a healthy manner". Thus, it is a condition that would lead to "deep conflicts" for those individuals, since, according to the teaching material examined by Diniz and Lionço, they "do not accept themselves as they are". At the end of the lesson, the following rhetorical question appears: "if this became the norm for human behavior, how would humanity perpetuate itself?"

Initially, the ADI 4,429 was sent to Supreme Court Justice Ayres de Britto. Due to his retirement, it was then redistributed to Justice Roberto Barroso, who convened a public hearing in July 2015. At the time, Barroso invited ten religious institutions and opened applications for other institutions, religious or not, to present their positions. Of 227 institutions that applied, 21 were selected to participate in the hearing. Each would have fifteen minutes to address issues related to the ADI, among them the principle of a secular State, the different experiences of state school systems regarding confessional, interfaith and non-confessional models of religious education, as well as their impact on public

school systems regarding different faiths and non-religious approaches.<sup>13</sup>

In the first STF hearing, the following organizations were present: Brazilian Secular League; Universal Church of the Kingdom of God; Brazilian Spiritist Federation; CONECTAS-Direitos Humanos; Brazilian Israeli Confederation; National Education Council; Institute of Brazilian Lawyers; the Assembly of God – Madureira Convention; Institute for Bioethics, Human Rights and Gender (ANIS); Brazil-Israel National Association of Lawyers; Observatory of Secularism in Schools; Brazilian Baptist Convention; Permanent Commission for Combating Racial, Ethnic and Color Discriminations and Prejudice; Amicus-DH; Mixed Congressional Caucus in Defense of the Family (represented by Congress Member Pastor Eurico); the House of Representatives’ Human Rights Commission and the Evangelical Congressional Caucus, both represented by Congress Member Marco Feliciano; National Confederation of Brazilian Bishops; Brahma Kumaris Raja Yoga Center; Permanent National Forum of Religious Education; Educational Action.

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<sup>13</sup> At the time, a Public Manifesto titled “Secularism and public education: in defense of the integral application of constitutional limits to religious education in public schools” was published. One of its passages reads: “The opening that religious education in schools represents reinforces a confusion that is still generalized among public agencies and civil servants, between private conceptions and beliefs and public ethics. This creates nearly unsurmountable daily obstacles to the implementation of some of the mandatory education guidelines, such as the teaching of African and African-Brazilian history and culture, human rights and gender and sexual diversity”. See: <http://www.edulaica.net.br/artigo/663/biblioteca/documentos-coletivos-pela-laicidade/manifesto-publico-laicidade-e-educacao-publica-2015/>. Among the various signatory associations, the broad participation of feminist and sexual diversity collectives stands out, including organizations such as: ABGLT—Brazilian Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transvestite and Transsexual Association, CFEMEA—Feminist Center of Studies and Advisory Services, SOS CORPO—Feminist Institute for Democracy, Catholics for the Right to Choose, National Feminist Health, Sexual Rights and Reproductive Rights Network, CLADEM—Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women’s Rights; Dandara Collective, among others.

Most institutions agreed with the unconstitutionality of the confessional model. The exceptions were CNBB, Congress Member Marco Feliciano and Congress Member Pastor Eurico, who defended a confessional religious education. After this initial hearing, the STF recently—September 2017—turned its attention to ADI 4,429 in a series of intercalated sessions, ending in a tightly divided decision. Justice Roberto Barroso was tasked with writing a report on the motion. Despite his support for a non-confessional religious education, the majority of votes ruled against the ADI.<sup>14</sup> The ruling confirmed the current scenario of juridical legitimation of the presence of religious beliefs in public schools. If, in practice, states have already legislated autonomously on the nature of religious education, from now on, the practice of religious proselytism in schools has been made official *de jure*, as was religious institutions' autonomy to produce teaching materials and to hire teachers.

As Cavaliere's (2006; 2007) work shows, the legitimacy of religious education in schools green-lights churches to operate as moralizing agents in school communities, with the salvationist goal of "producing" docile, well-behaved students. According to some public-school teachers, religious education is of interest, as it serves as an antidote to moral disorder, violence and lack of discipline. Based on a moralizing sense of religion, religious education is viewed as "educational guidance". Even when there is resistance in schools, administrators and teachers approve the offer of religious education as a form of control. Religious education can thus be thought of as a sort of new incarnation of the defunct "moral and civic education" of the military dictatorship period. What also seems evident to us is that the school becomes an increasingly turbulent space for moral disputes. Especially at times, as we will examine below, of intense conservative investment in the moral bases of schooling.

The current victory of confessional religious education at the STF ratifies the already-existing possibility that religions (especially

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<sup>14</sup> The final decision was split, six votes against five.

Christian denominations) will hire their own teachers and produce and circulate teaching materials whose contents need not be approved by the Ministry of Education, nor follow human rights prerogatives—unlike all other school subjects. Thus, the public-school environment becomes and increasingly strategic locus of Christian hegemonic aspirations to massively disseminate their values, going against Republican values such as educational freedom, human rights, equity, and even religious diversity itself.

However, the dispersion of favorable and unfavorable positions toward confessional religious education, with some Evangelical actors opposing the STF decision, also betrays a fragmented horizon, with actors who, guided by different interests and possessing differing levels of political capital, do not operate as a unified front. This is not the case of disputes involving the moral content of basic education. As we will see, these themes currently work as the tight binding of a very solid Christian bloc, whose parliamentary articulators promote a vision that we may term as ultraconservative, and whose elements resonate—with surprising disregard to the existence of dissident voices—with surprising harmony between Catholics and Evangelicals.

### **The empowerment of the “conservative religious congressional bloc.” Controversies surrounding sexual morality in the school arena**

Though disputed and occasionally challenged, as highlighted in the previous section, Catholic participation has been constant in the design of educational policy in Brazil. However, the novelty of the past few years has been the diversification of religious actors present in this area, with the emergence and growing protagonism of Evangelical actors, reflecting their presence in national politics (Oro, 2013; Machado, 2006). Along with this emergence, One can also observe a distinct radicalization of the conservative moral agenda in education. If, in recent history, the public visibility and expressiveness of Evangelical leaders contrasts with—and in fact underlines—the more discreet, but intense and powerful, influence

of the Catholic Church in the Brazilian public education, creating a chiaroscuro effect, the dislocation of these debates from behind the scenes to the center of the political arena also carries a heightening of antagonisms, which involves both shares of Christianity.

Despite the plurality of Protestant (or, as some prefer, “Christian”) denominations that make up this field, we have chosen to refer to these actors by the all-encompassing, relatively-stabilized term “Evangelical” (see Almeida, 2017:5-6, in this dossier), also present in the self-definition of the corresponding congressional caucus. What interests us of the public characterization of certain political actors as “conservative religious” is the performative dimension of this definition, that is, how a collective identity gains substance and relevance due to the reiteration of its naming. Regarding the conservative cause in education, Almeida’s (2017:6) methodological proposal of questioning “how certain Evangelicals (the hegemonic, visible share) enter what has been termed the “conservative wave”, both constituting, and being constituted by, it” is pertinent. This political-religious actor recently reached a pinnacle of sorts in the educational sphere, an accomplishment which is still reverberates in the public debate.

Two landmarks of the Evangelical ascension regarding educational issues were controversies employed by campaigns whose protagonists were largely religious actors, and which had a notorious public impact. The first, led by Pentecostal congress members and their allies, was a smear campaign that led to a presidential veto of the Schools Without Homophobia project in 2011. The second, still ongoing, controversy employs the “gender ideology” category in order to further the censorship of contents related to gender, sexuality and human rights in guidelines and standards for basic education. In this second controversy, Catholic leaders are relatively more prominent than in the other, but within a more extensive set of alliances, also incorporating a secular base through the Schools Without Political Parties (*Escola Sem Partido*) Movement. In addition to an apparently shared religious conviction, both mobilizations encompass stances against Human

Rights, finding allies among other “ultraconservative” groups, to whom this agenda represents an updated version of the communist threat. A diverse, often right-leaning set of actors make up a broader strategic alliance, which also involves a shared sense whose ethos is secular (Miguel, 2016).

Both cases allow us to observe the agitation of social anxieties related to moral dispositions, under the classic form of the moral panic. In this article, we are mainly interested in some of the effects of this communication device and social mechanism, capable of agglutinating collective dispositions and of dislocating objects and signifiers. The first effect is the enthronement, on the one hand, of the moral entrepreneurs who promote it and, on the other, the dehumanization of the scapegoats held responsible for the claimed threat. The second is their ability to address other political actors and citizens in general, who see themselves forced to take on the moral commitment of positioning themselves on “the side of the good”, because otherwise they would incarnate the imagined monster recreated by the warning. Janice Irvine (2006) describes the emotional script of the moral panic mobilized in the United States by ultraconservative Christians who, over approximately one decade, from 1990 to 2003, mobilized whole communities against sex education, with more than 1,000 episodes in cities across the country:

Fear of stigma silences potential supporters of sex education, and, in turn, their silence suggests a consensus for the opposition. Volatile political climates attract media coverage, which often works to sensationalize and reinforce the panic. Moreover, emotions can amplify the symbolic power of language, thereby enhancing its potential to persuade followers (Irvine, 2006:87).

The controversy surrounding the Schools Without Homophobia project arose from three didactic videos that showed teenagers positively experiencing their LGBT identities in school. They showed the history of negotiations, starting with the “discovery” of non-heterosexual affection, and of gender transition

among fictional characters, specifically, two girls who become romantically involved, one boy who admits the possibility that he may be bisexual, and a trans girl (Leite, 2014). Acting as a network, rising conservative actors in the National Congress insistently disseminated and amplified, through different means (parliamentary debates, TV, press, on-line social networks, print fliers) notoriously distorted versions of the material, alerting to the exposure of “children aged 6, 7, 8 years old to pornographic content” and to the danger of turning schools into a terrain where children would be “enticed” into “homosexuality”, making them easy prey for pedophiles (Leite, 2014:249).

Vital and Lopes (2013) draw attention to certain nuances in the political and religious affiliations of the actors who were part of the network that activated this panic. The first alarm was issued by Jair Bolsonaro (then PP/RJ), a nationalist, right-wing, then-Catholic congress member,<sup>15</sup> whose main political agenda is not religious, but rather the representation of the military corporation and the lobby against disarmament. Other actors later became spokespeople for the resistance to what they nick-named the “gay kit”: Representatives João Campos (then PSDB/GO, President of the Evangelical Congressional Caucus) and Anthony Garotinho (PR/RJ, Vice-President of the same caucus), Senator Magno Malta (PR/ES, President of the Permanent Mixed Congressional Caucus in Defense of the Brazilian Family) and Representatives Marco Feliciano (PSC/SP, from the Evangelical congressional bloc, then starting his congressional career) and Eros Biodini (PTB/MG, of the Catholic congressional bloc), among others. All three congressional blocs began to demand that the Ministry of Education not approve the materials developed by the Schools Without Homophobia project. The demand, which explicitly articulated patriarchal, homophobic and anti-“leftist” demands, was tied to their reactions against other initiatives in defense of LGBT rights: the 122 Bill,

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<sup>15</sup> In 2016, he converted to Protestantism and was baptized by Pastor Everardo, of the Assembly of God, Madureira Ministry, and president of the Social Christian Party (PSC), of which Bolsonaro is currently a member.



which would criminalize homophobia; ADPF 132, which, that same year, led the STF to rule in favor of stable unions for same-sex couples; the National Plan for Promoting the Citizenship and Human Rights of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transexuals (PNLGBT, in Portuguese)<sup>16</sup>; and also the versions of the National Human Rights Plan (PNDH, in Portuguese).

The same congress members demanded, and eventually obtained, a commitment from President Dilma Rousseff and then-Education Minister Fernando Haddad that the materials would be removed from circulation, going against various official statements issued by national and international educational experts and organizations (among them, for instance, UNESCO) (Leite, 2014). What supposedly tipped the scales, at a time when the Dilma administration was increasingly losing support, were threats made by the “religious congressional bloc” of blocking the government’s entire congressional activity and, later, of subjecting Dilma’s Chief of Staff, Antônio Palocci, to a hearing on accusations of illicit enrichment (Vital and Lopes, 2013).

To the moral entrepreneurs involved, this “crusade” became a great opportunity to build and reinforce their political capital. This was especially true for the congress members and party leaders who followed suit. They were the ones—Anthony Garotinho is one example—who articulated the idea that the Evangelical Caucus’s “freedom of conscience” to support—or not—the motion to demand that Palocci officially explain his alleged illicit enrichment was a “bargaining chip” in exchange of having the Schools Without Homophobia materials removed (Vital and Lopes, 2013). Regardless, on the one hand, of their concrete bargaining ability, or other factors that may have led to this

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<sup>16</sup> TRANSLATOR’S NOTE: In Brazil, many trans women identify as “transvestite”. Many also draw a distinction between “transvestite” and “transsexual”. This usage is reflected in the names of important LGBT organizations and in government policies described in this text. For this reason, these terms have been translated literally, instead of being replaced by terms more commonly used in English-language contexts, such as “trans” or “transgender”.

outcome, and, on the other, of their also concrete and visible fragmentations, what expressively prevails is the impression of a supposedly-cohesive political actor's influence, one capable of imposing its discourse. The (perhaps necessary) expressiveness and political visibility of Evangelical congress members and allies contrast with the relatively silent, but undisputed, hegemony of the Catholic Church on educational policy, and marks changes in the ways conservative religious actors organize, both to influence educational policy and to intervene in sexual politics. At the same time, they also mark a moment of heightened disputes surrounding moral values, especially regarding sexual diversity.

In an interview with Vital and Lopes, André Lázaro, then responsible for the Continuous Education, Literacy and Diversity Secretariat (SECAD, in Portuguese) of the Ministry of Education, explains that the materials had in fact been designed so as not to elicit such reactions. The Ministry allegedly insisted on “toning down” the affirmative perspective of sexual diversity (Vital and Lopes, 2013:126). However, Vanessa Leite argues that the turn towards an approach that dares admit the existence of LGBT teenagers and the possibility that they might “take on” diverse sexual identities is itself the element capable of triggering this reaction:

What seems to be the case is that the ESH videos bothered people so much precisely because they bet on a positive affirmation of the experience of homosexuality, bisexuality, or trans identities in adolescence. The material, despite the name “Schools Without Homophobia”, focused on the existence, and, one might say, resistance, of these youths in school. The most interesting aspect, when looking at the project's trajectory, is that its opponents focused their criticism on the possibility, presented in the project, of “being gay” during adolescence, thus the pejorative epithet “gay kit” (Leite, 2014:252).

Damara Alves, an Evangelical Congressional Caucus aide, in an interview with Vital and Lopes, recalls that the caucus had

already questioned several of the Health Ministry's educational materials related to harm reduction for the trans population due to similar reasons (Vital and Lopes, 2013:117). Other strategies for combating homophobia, such as the ones that denounce tangible forms of violence and victimization, as well as preventive sexual education initiatives that do not question heteronormativity did not—at first—have such an impact. However, as Leite (2014) points out in her conclusions regarding the case, the educational policy arena is notably more sensitive to sexuality taboos, and maybe less permeable to affirmative discourses than health policies, into which the paradigm of sexual diversity rights entered along with AIDS prevention policies.

If in the Schools Without Homophobia project (or the “gay kit”, according to its detractors’ ironic vision, amplified by the media) involved a government policy, the current scenario of the disputes we discuss in this article has reached the legislation that establishes the form and content of basic education in Brazil. In 2014, Law n. 13,005 was enacted. This is the legislative framework of the National Education Plan (PNE, in Portuguese), which sets educational policy until 2024. Despite fierce conservative resistance in the document’s preparatory instances in the National Educational Forum, the always-conflictive mentions of gender, sexuality and diversity, set within a rights framework—a view promoted by the Ministry of Education at the time, a result of a consensus between government and civil society experts—remained in the original document’s basic standards. Nonetheless, after a long debate in the House of Representatives, which united Evangelical, Catholic and other conservative actors against those mentions, the original text was strategically modified.

The original project proposed, among its goals, the “overcoming of educational inequalities, with an emphasis on promoting racial, regional, gender and sexual orientation equality”.

The conservative religious congressional bloc was able to impose the suppression of the terms “racial, regional, gender and sexual orientation equality”. The final text supports, more

generally, the “overcoming of educational inequalities, with an emphasis on promoting citizenship and on eradicating all forms of discrimination” (Nardi et al., 2015:7-8). The suppression of the focus on overcoming “racial, regional, gender and sexual orientation inequalities” from the PNE goals is highly strategic. The law establishes that states, municipalities and the federal district must formulate their education plans or alter those already in force, in order to adhere to the national standards within a year. By substituting race, region, gender and sexual orientation by the more general notion of “educational inequalities, promoting citizenship and eradicating all forms of discrimination”, it in fact restricts the reach of these principles and creates the possibility—and here lies the strategic dislocation of meaning—of adopting a moral approach to gender relations and sexuality, under other names.

Empowered by this success, its promoters led to an avalanche of education reform movements in state and municipal legislatures which is currently at its peak.<sup>17</sup> “Sexual colonialism” and “death ideology,” supposedly at the base of an “ultrafeminist” agenda, are cited among earlier ideas, part of the argumentative base under the current term “gender ideology” (Junqueira, 2017:33), and to this day recur in pronouncements by the Catholic hierarchy—which sometimes betrays a complex discursive order, not necessarily aligned with the neoliberal drift embraced by other actors who currently participate in campaigns against “gender ideology” in Brazilian education, as we will see below.

The other key to this relative success was the involvement of the national School Without Political Parties Movement (MESP, in Portuguese) in this “crusade” (a term used by its own members). Although, as Luis Felipe Miguel notes, in its origins, the movement sought to combat a—vaguely defined—“ideological indoctrination” supposedly taking place in the Brazilian formal

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<sup>17</sup> A useful source of information and monitoring tool of this mobilization may be found at: <https://professorescontraoescolasepartido.wordpress.com/vigiando-os-projetos-de-lei/> (accessed on Oct. 22, 2017).

education, one centrally identified as “Marxist”, the “rise in MESP’s importance in public debate occurs when its project converges to that of another strand of the conservative agenda: combating so-called “gender ideology”” (Miguel, 2016:595). To Miguel, the current conservative agenda, which has reached an expressiveness unprecedented in the democratic, post-dictatorship period, combines three strands of reactionary discourses: an ultraliberal “libertarianism” that preaches an unnuanced concept of a minimum State; an anticommunist strand that interprets PT’s rise and political success as part of a totalitarian continental conspiracy; and, lastly, a “fundamentalist” strand, due to its dogmatic, generally religious, nature, propelled by the Pentecostal growth and Neopentecostal churches’ decision to intervene in State politics. Nonetheless, Miguel warns:

At times, people speak of an “Evangelical congressional bloc”, but the expression not only ignores differences between Protestant denominations, but also casts aside the important presence of the more conservative sector of the Catholic Church. Or even [continued in a footnote] the presence of a fundamentalist Spiritist, isolated, but very active in his two terms in the House of Representatives: Luiz Bassuma, from Bahia (Miguel, 2016:593).

The capillarity of both Catholic and Evangelical bases is instrumental to the success of this crusade and to its proponents’ position in the national and local scenes. Miguel states that: “During the appreciation of the educational plans, it was common to see legislatures overrun with nuns, standing along Neopentecostal Pastors, pressuring State legislature members” (Miguel, 2016:599). He also mentions the circulation of extra-judicial notification models, based on a selective interpretation of national and international normative frameworks, originally created by Catholics and soon also appropriated by the MESP, intended for parents to use in preventing “indoctrination” (Miguel, 2016:602). Another element of note in the contents of the Schools Without Homophobia project materials is a conspiracy narrative

employed by MESP is a view of the family's absolute authority over their children's education, in which teachers are reduced to the "technical" function of transmitting ideologically "neutral" contents.

## **Conclusion**

This article sought to address the relationship between confessional perspectives and conservative moral dispositions in the Brazilian educational field based on the analysis of the changes in the legal regulation of religious education, on the one hand, and of current controversies involving sexual politics in standards, programs and school materials. We believe this endeavor is relevant due to its strategic importance in understanding the reemergence and undeniable advancement of different kinds of "conservatism" within the specific field of education and within the broader issue of "childhood/adolescence" (Leite, 2004).

Even though a considerable academic and activist production on those two objects/issues already exists, we observed that it is dispersed in two main fields of inquiry, which rarely establish a more direct, incisive dialog: the literature that discusses secularism in education; and the literature that discusses issues related to gender and sexuality in education. Both focuses seem to us crucial to the current academic and political investment and have already made important contributions to the field—and, in fact, served to structure the arguments we have developed in this article. However, we believe both thematic through lines remain substantially separated in their specific reflections. It was therefore up to us to attempt to bring these discussions together in a more systematic way—something which is furthermore unprecedented. In addition to the latent need for exploring the porosities in these two analytical fields, our initial hypothesis was that these were in effect complementary movements within the mobilization of "religious conservatism" in Brazilian educational policies. Though the sources give us few elements with which to reconstruct the density of the aspects related to sexual morality in the debate on

religious education over the century, the progressive diversification and dispersion of religious positions contrasts with the intense, and apparently cohesive, current mobilization surrounding the conservative agenda.

One should question, from the standpoint of the defenders of a confessional religious education, the coherence between the premise of absolute parental sovereignty and the delegation of children's moral education to religious institutions. What is this sovereignty? What is also notable in these controversies, in addition to the moral panic in the face of school "indoctrination", is the plurality of appropriations of categories originating in the liberal ideology. An echo of the 1950s "laic or free" debate, today "freedom" is called upon to mean "religious freedom" (of parents, of the religious institutions involved in education) as well. Likewise, policies against sexism, gender violence and homophobia are denounced as forms of censorship by those who, supposedly based on their religious convictions, preach that homosexuality is against nature and the family order.

In this mobilization, congress members and pastors (in a broad sense, including Evangelical ministers, Catholic priests and even other moral entrepreneurs), many using both titles, appoint themselves guardians of morals as well as, on different levels, of education and the well-being and safety of children in the face of threats by "pedophiles" and "defenders of the end of the heterosexual family". Additionally, they protect the present and the future of the "Brazilian family" in the face of discourses that seek to deconstruct patriarchal authority. Finally, they intend to protect the political system and their vision of democracy from the advancement of "left-wing" ideologies, such as "secularism" and "human rights" discourses, which question the freedom of "men of goodwill" to decide how their children will be educated, as well as pastors' freedom to preach according to their convictions.

Moral panics instigate, on the other hand, collective anxieties and hate speech against gays, lesbians and trans individuals in general, and specifically against the "LGBT left's" actions in national politics, construed as a "loud minority", deviant and

threatening, privileged, undemocratic and authoritarian, whose will is imposed on a Christian nationalist majority. Pro-LGBT rights initiatives are viewed as part of an international conspiracy, and its Brazilian defenders as internal enemies seeking to subordinate the national project to “alien” ideas. Thus, a polarized setting is produced, which forces governments (as well as congress members and members of the Judiciary) and other political actors to publicly position themselves on one side of the dispute or the other, with great costs if they do not choose the conservative side. This text sought to contribute to a broad understanding of the context, conditions and terms in which these frameworks are produced. Nonetheless, their further exploration persists as an analytical and political-normative challenge.

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