

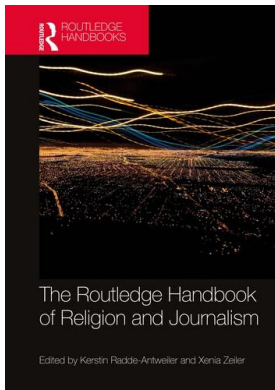
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FROM GOOD PRESS TO FAKE NEWS

Who's got the word? Religion, authority and journalism in Brazil

Karina Kosicki Bellotti

Introduction

This chapter¹ aims to approach three aspects of the Brazilian religious scenario: first, the relationship between journalism, religion and authority; second, the impact of news coverage on religious dynamics and third, the ways the mediatization of religion has influenced negotiations of religious authority and power. Brazil, the largest country of South America, is characterized by a pronounced religious diversity, deepened by the Evangelical increase in the past 40 years after three centuries of Catholic hegemony and the growth of religious minorities like Afro-Brazilian religions (mainly Candomblé and Umbanda).

This chapter is divided into four sections, the first of which discusses the concepts of religion, journalism and authority, approached through the theoretical frame of the mediatization of religion. Then follow two interconnected case studies: first, the news coverage of Evangelicals by the mainstream press in the 1990s, such as the hegemonic television network *Rede Globo* and newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, which instigated religious prejudice against Evangelicals. The second case study discusses the use of the press by Evangelical groups in the 2010s, during which their political engagement rose, fomenting intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions and LGBTQ+ and feminist groups. Finally, the chapter discusses the specific challenges for scholars of religion, journalism and authority and asks how the Brazilian cases may help to reflect on the roles of the press and the scholarship of religion in a broader sense. Readers should note that in Brazil, the term Evangelical (*evangélico*) is used to define both Protestants and Pentecostals, despite their theological and liturgical differences. In Brazil, Anglo-Saxon missionaries founded Protestant churches in mid-1800s, while Swedish and Italian missionaries coming out of the Azusa Street Revival in the USA founded Pentecostal churches in the 1910s. However, only in the mid-20th century did Pentecostals start to outnumber Protestants, driving the Evangelical growth by the 1980s and thereafter (Freston 1993).

Mediatizing religion in Brazil: religion, authority and journalism

The theoretical frame of the Italian (or Roman) School of History of Religions, established in the early 20th century by Raffaele Pettazzoni, contributed to the development of a historical and comparative perspective on religions by considering religions as social and cultural production that is subject to change. Therefore, according to historian Angelo Brelich (1966), religion can be defined as a set of creeds and practices relative to super-human or divine beings in certain historical contexts, comprising both institutionalized organizations and individual expressions of faith, devotion and spirituality.

This concept of religion is pertinent to the Brazilian religious scenario, once known for its high rate of Catholicism, due to three centuries of Portuguese colonization (1500–1822). The Catholic Church has been facing the competition of new groups, the Evangelicals, mostly Pentecostals. This Evangelical portion of the population has increased since the 1980s (from 6.6% in 1980 to 22.2% in 2010), followed by practitioners of other minority religions, with minor growth: Afro-Brazilian religions (Candomblé, Umbanda), Spiritism, Judaism, Islamism, Buddhism, New Religious Movements (New Age, Oriental Religions, etc.), among others (IBGE 2010). This diversity is permeated with religious competition. Shortly after the Brazilian Republic was proclaimed in 1889, religious freedom was nominally guaranteed by the constitution of 1891, but the Catholic Church worked hard to remain a hegemonic cultural institution. Catholics' condemnation of Afro-Brazilian religions and Evangelical denominations helped to marginalize them throughout the 20th century. Moreover, through their means of communication and church services, some Pentecostal groups have been attacking Afro-Brazilian adherents in the past half-century (Silva 2007, 207–236), as will be demonstrated in this chapter.

Using Brelich's (1966) definition of religion, it is important to distinguish the institution Catholic Church from the various forms of Catholic devotions and practices in Brazil (Teixeira 2009, 17–30). This distinction explains the cultural permanence of Catholicism in Brazil, despite the decline of organized Catholicism and the competition it faces from other religions, mainly the Evangelical churches. These are a growing minority, organized in multiple denominations and very active in the media (Chesnut 1997).

Besides these features, the Brazilian religious field also reflects the general tendencies of Western religious history over the past two centuries: the expansion of religious autonomy, deinstitutionalization and detraditionalization of organized religions, along with blooming religious hybridization and the mediatization of religion. This last tendency is paramount to this study. According to Stig Hjarvard (2013, 79),

mediatization of religion may be considered part of a gradual process of secularization in the late modern society; it is the historical process by which the media have adopted many of the social functions that were previously performed by religious institutions

Besides,

... as a whole the media as conduits [of messages and symbols], languages [aesthetics] and environments are responsible for the mediatization of religion ... The outcome is not a new kind of religion as such, but rather a new social and cultural condition in which the power to define and practice religion has been affected.

(Hjarvard 2013, 83)

Hoover (2016, 15–36) characterizes mediatization of religion as the influence of media in the shaping of cultural life in the Western world, including the religious realm, framing the way religious agents relate and communicate with their flock, and the insertion of religion into the public sphere.

Hjarvard also identifies three types of mediatization of religion: first, the *religious media*, characterized by “media organizations and practices controlled and performed by religious actors” (Hjarvard 2013, 83); second, *journalism on religion* (Hjarvard 2013, 86–90), which frames religion in the public sphere according professional rules of journalism and *banal religion*, which brings “religious imagination to the cultural realm” (Hjarvard 2013, 90). This text addresses the religious media produced by Evangelicals and the journalism on religion – mainly on Catholic Church and Evangelicals in Brazil. Both cases reveal the ways that religious groups compete for cultural and political legitimacy and authority in the Brazilian public sphere, especially after the popularization of digital media in the 2000s.

The mediatization of religion has grown over the past four decades in Brazil, affecting the religious authority of organized religions, which can no long take their position in society for granted. The discussion on religious authority can be traced back to Weber’s (1978) study on the three types of authority: legal or bureaucratic, charismatic and traditional. In the following scholarship of religion, media and culture, other studies have been expanding the notions of religious authority in the face of the mediatization of religion.

As religious traditions become more available in the marketplace of culture through the media, they came to be relativized, with their religious authority being exposed, not determined solely by law, tradition or charisma. They are in constant need of negotiation in order to prove authenticity to their adherents (Hoover 2016, 30–32). Regarding the first type of mediatization of religion – the uses of media by religious groups – there is the case explored by Cheong (2016, 81–102) of the uses of Twitter by American Protestant and Pentecostal pastors to reinforce daily their position of authority and leadership in their communities and churches, with constant and omnipresent communication with their followers (Cheong 2016, 88–90).

Such uses of media are also common in the Brazilian religious landscape. For instance, since the 1990s popular Catholic priests such as Father Marcelo Rossi and Father Fábio de Mello reinvigorated the figure of the clergy – traditional authority – using both new technologies of communications and legacy media (television, radio, books). Catholic media re-signify and transmit a plethora of saints and devotions every day, engaging adherents in worship practices on- and off-line (Carranza 2011). In reaction to the expansion of Evangelical media since the 1980s, Catholics present their message with the support of the Vatican, which also became more active in media with Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) and Pope Francis (2013–).

Horsfield (2016, 55–56) analyzed the role of different means of communication in the struggles for authority throughout the history of Christianity – from the oral tradition of the first Christians to the written culture of the Church. In the context of the digital media, he highlighted the engagement of religious adherents as meaning-makers, which has been calling religious leadership’s attention. This is evident in the constant involvement by members of the Catholic and Evangelical clergy in Brazil with social media that shows not only their willingness to participate in the new media, but also their perception of the popular use of media for purposes like the exchange of ideas, the expression of dissent and the reinforcement of religious identities.

Therefore, authority also addresses the notion of identity (Campbell 2007, 1043–1062), that is, within a religious organization, leaders may define who is a true believer or not, who deserves promotion or condemnation and to what extent the organization or its adherents

may open up to other groups or practices – secular or religious. In one of the case studies of this chapter, Evangelical social media has been used in recent years to attack feminism, LGBTQ+ people, Afro-Brazilian religions adherents and symbols. Famous pastors and Evangelical politicians proclaim truths to be spread via news portals, reverberating ideas on gender, sexual and religious issues that are well known by their followers, who replicate the news in social media, especially on Facebook and WhatsApp. Therefore, the use of media by religious groups aims to establish the boundaries between the pious and the impious and promotes engagement of the flock as a sign of belonging.

The second type of mediatization of religion – journalism on religion – refers to the presence of religion in the secular press, so that the language of the media shapes the religious sphere, including the very notions of religion, religiousness and non-religiousness (Hjarvard 2013, 86–90, Hoover 2016, 24). For this text, I consider journalism as not solely news coverage, since the Brazilian regulation of the journalist profession also includes press offices, higher education regarding journalism (teaching and research activities), chronicling and photojournalism, among other activities (Presidência da República 1979). However, the type of journalism approached in this chapter, which relates directly with issues of religious authority, includes the news coverage, reporting and opinion pieces, some of the bases of journalism in the country (Bergamo 2011, 233–269, Hjarvard 2013, 87).

According to Hoover (2016, 26), “[...] modern media and mediation have the potential to inscribe different nuances of religious authority and inscribe or evoke authority.” In Brazil, news coverage of religion has spread stereotypes of certain religious groups and reinforced the authority of Catholicism and of organized religion as the only true face of religion. Despite the fact that religion is a crucial aspect of Brazilian life, there never was a specialized religious coverage in any of the mainstream press – an absence that is also reproduced in the curricula of the main journalism schools to this day.

Brazilian scholars of communication such as Marialva Barbosa (2007) and Nelson Werneck Sodré (1999) have analyzed the main characteristics of the news media established in the country. Press Media in Brazil are concentrated in the hands of a few corporations owned by powerful political family groups. By far the most powerful group is *Globo*, owned by the *Marinho* family, running newspapers, magazines, Internet portals (*G1.com*; *globo.com*), the television network *Rede Globo*, radio and thousands of television and radio affiliates. Their main outlet is the television network, which established a high standard of production and transmission, boosted by the broadcasting politics of the federal administration under the dictatorship of 1964 to 1985. Nowadays, even with its dropping ratings due to the competition of other means of communication, the *Globo* network still manages to define political and cultural agendas for public debate. Two of their main products are telenovelas and the evening news *Jornal Nacional* (National News), on air since the late 1960s. Another major media outlet to be analyzed in this chapter is the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, of national circulation and founded in 1921, owned by the *Frias* family.

An important characteristic of the news media in Brazil is the ideal of impartiality (Barbosa 2007, 81), created by the incipient corporate media early in the 1920s/1930s and intensified after the 1960s, inspired by the American model of news coverage (Bergamo 2011). The idea of neutral coverage is a pattern cultivated until today in the news outlets and schools of journalism, which values information over opinion to convey the news of varied issues for a mass audience (Barbosa 2007, 151). However, scholars like Melo, Fadul and Silva (1979) affirm that ideology is intrinsic to communication and international studies as well reveal the ideological, racial, gender, class and sexual bias influencing the work environment of journalists and the production of the news (Allan 2010).

Therefore, the relation between religion, authority and journalism in Brazil must be scrutinized in this larger context, since religious authority in Brazil is disputed within the religious realm and certain types of authorities are reinforced in the secular news coverage. Religion has typically received little attention from the printed media. With the advent of electronic media in the mid-20th century, along with the rise of media corporations, journalists continued to underestimate religion as news material, except when the Pope visited the country in the 1980s and 1990s. By that time, new religions started to seek visibility and old religions engaged in a battle for the hearts and souls of Brazilians with the use of media. The following two case studies show how these two realities were intertwined over the Brazilian scenario in the past 40 years.

Evangelicals in the news in Brazil (1990s–2010s). A first case study

In 1989, Edir Macedo, the leader of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD, in the Portuguese acronym), a Pentecostal church created in 1977 in the city of Rio de Janeiro, became the new major shareholder of a bankrupt television network, *Rede Record*. Once unknown by the media, the church started to be covered by the news media in a derogative way, e.g., its leader, the self-entitled Bishop Macedo, was usually only referred as a bishop in quotation marks and its clergy were labeled as pastors in quotation marks as well (Freston 1993, 6–25). Their flock was portrayed as puppets, poor and desperate people manipulated by greedy pastors, as shown in a poignant untitled cartoon in the second page of the major newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, of national circulation (Oliveira 1995, 2b). The fact that IURD followed the Prosperity Gospel caused revolt in many journalists, who referred with awe to the charge of tithe in exchange for miracles (Rossi 1995). From 1989 onwards, IURD was targeted by major print outlets (newspapers and magazines), as well as television channels, with an ebb and flow of denunciations, varying from accusations of tax evasion, illegal business deals to finance the purchase of the television Record and charlatanism.

On October 12, 1995, the national holiday of Our Lady of Aparecida, Catholic Patroness of Brazil, in a late-night church television program, IURD's bishop Sérgio von Helde kicked a large image of the saint, mocking it for being an empty statue, incapable of performing any miracles. The episode, rapidly known as the *kick of the saint*, caused commotion among Catholics and in society in general, stirring the ongoing animosity between IURD and Catholic supporters in the secular media. Chiefly the *Globo network*, but also other media organizations, frequently labeled Evangelical churches and their followers as sects or fanatics.

Religious scholars observed that this and other events revealed the predominance of the Catholic worldview in the language used by journalists when reporting news about IURD and other Evangelical churches and leadership. Paul Freston (1993, 6–25) demonstrated that the secular press and Catholic agents portrayed Evangelicals as illegitimate actors in Brazilian religious scenario, generalizing the case of IURD to the entire Evangelical field. Protestants have been rejected by Brazilian Catholics since their arrival in the 19th century, but when Evangelicals reached greater visibility, the counterstrike was fierce. The Catholic Church feared the growth of the – in their own words – *Protestant sects*, accusing them of stealing their adherents, as attested in the article “Growth of Protestant Sects forces Catholic Church to change” (Folha de São Paulo 1995b). Journalist Clovis Rossi (1995), from the *Folha de São Paulo*, in a column about the *kick of the saint* episode, stated: “The Universal Church demands more from the pockets than from the knees of their flock” and an editorial in the *Folha de São Paulo* (1995a), entitled “Dead souls,” also about this event, asserted: “The critique from

the Catholic clergy of IURD is right. This church takes advantage of the cultural blindness of millions of Brazilians to thrive and multiply its profits.”

Whilst the *kick of the saint* generated fury, the constant attacks made by IURD and other Evangelical churches against Afro-Brazilian symbols and adherents did not cause the same uproar. After that episode, rarely did the Universal Church come into direct conflict with the Catholic Church again. Nevertheless, it never stopped demonizing Afro-Brazilian religions’ deities and practices. For instance, part of IURD’s church services offer exorcism of demons and purification from the evil influence of Candomblé and Umbanda’s entities (Campos 1997). Afro-Brazilian religions have been largely practiced by disenfranchised people suffering from religious and racial exclusion (Chesnut 2003, 102–127) and these are IURD’s preferred targets. For many years, the press remained silent regarding this matter, which only hit the news when Afro-Brazilian religious agents won lawsuits against IURD’s actions, for example, regarding the right to reply on IURD’s television/radio shows (Gonçalves 2018, Redação 2018).

That is – when it comes to scandals, any religion becomes news material. Stewart Hoover (2016, 18) mentions the case of the exposure of pedophile cases in the Catholic Church in the USA in the 1990s, which undermined the authority of that institution at the time, after decades of deferential treatment of institutional religions by the press. However, while in the USA the Catholic Church is a minority religion, in Brazil, the press treated these scandals as individual faults in a distant reality, so they barely touched the church’s authority in the mainstream media coverage.

In the past few years, Brazilian news outlets that used to cover the Catholic Church and ignore other religious groups now give brief news on Evangelicals celebrations and on demonstrations of religious violence and intolerance against Afro-Brazilian religions adherents. The former is due to the Evangelical growth and the mutual approximation between some Evangelical leaders and the dominating media, namely *Rede Globo*. For instance, prominent Evangelical leaders including Silas Malafaia reported close conversations with Rede Globo’s staff in 2010 and by that period, he was seen on the evening news and variety shows (Anon. 2010). The latter is due to the high visibility of Afro-Brazilian movements and to the recognition of African heritage and racial equality in the past decade. One of the main achievements of the Afro-Brazilian social movements was the Law 10699/03, which instituted the teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian history and culture at all levels of basic education. Such teachings include the study of Afro-Brazilian religions, which are strongly rejected by Evangelical (and sometimes Catholic) families because of the demonization committed by certain Pentecostal churches of Afro-Brazilian religious symbols and creeds.

However, in a time with a growing need for dialogue and comprehension concerning religious issues, the news media in Brazil are still largely negligent and silent. The ways the news media covered religion in the 20th century contributed to the reinforcement of certain notions of religion – namely, institutionalized Catholicism and of so-called *legitimate* religious agents and *illegitimate* religious subjects (Cunha 2016). Therefore, the news media contributed to the legitimation in the public sphere of the authority of the Catholic Church, in contrast to the decline of Catholicism registered in the national census since the 1980s. The news media also stereotype Muslims (a minority religion in Brazil), echoing prejudices of part of the international Western media. Magali Cunha (2017) demonstrated how Muslims appeared mostly as terrorists, while the Catholic Church received careful and constant attention, with news from the Vatican and Catholic authorities and national coverage of Catholic religious holidays, such as Corpus Christi and Our Lady of Aparecida Day.

The other type of mediatization of religion is the religious media, including the press, to influence Brazilian education and culture during the 20th and early 21st centuries. Regarding solely journalism, throughout this period, it is clear that the neglect of pluralistic religious coverage in secular journalism provided space for biased representations of religious themes, thereby contributing to political and cultural prejudices in Brazil.

Good press and fake news: the past and the present of religious press. A second case study

In the early 20th century, the Catholic Church invested heavily in print media in order to spread the *good press* and influence society in terms of taste, politics and education. After the legal separation of church and state in 1889, the Catholic Church invested in new ways to engage lay people in the public sphere. One of these initiatives was the investment in the *good press*, i.e., the diffusion of printed material (periodicals, books, newspapers) made by clergy and lay people in the early 20th century (Santos 2017). Despite the limited success of the good press, the Catholic Church managed to infuse the idea that Catholicism was the only true and authentic Brazilian religion, and this idea was incorporated in the public sphere, including in the news media. However, the cultural and political influence of the Catholic Church remained limited in the public and private spheres as secularization and religious competition advanced in the 20th century.

Evangelicals also invested in print media in the 19th and 20th centuries in Brazil, for proselytism and religious instruction. However, it was the extensive use of radio and television that helped to popularize the Evangelical religion by the second half of the last century, not to mention the use of the Internet in the early 21st century (Bellotti 2016, 451–461). The digital media have the effect of influencing culture to achieve political results. The webpages of Evangelical news portals such as *Gospel Prime*, *Gospel+* and *Guiame* claim that Brazilian Christians, especially Evangelicals, are persecuted by secular society and media. These Evangelicals blame mainstream media of being obedient to left-wing, feminist and gay agenda, which motivate the attack of Christian values and beliefs. Since the mid-2000s, these portals have conveyed news from other media outlets (even from dominant news media, like *Globo's G1*), offering a platform for Evangelicals to debate and usually corroborate the conservative agenda. *Gospel Prime's* editors, for instance, affirmed on 20 April 2018 that

We're in an electoral [presidential] year, and it is evident that the objective of the great media is to avoid the growth of the conservatives and their spokesmen, as is the case of Gospel Prime.

(*Prime 2018b*)

Their editors responded contrarily to a derogatory report by *Época* magazine (from *Globo* Company – Borges 2018) in which *Gospel Prime* was classified among the top ten greatest fake news websites.

With the rise of left-wing administrations (2003–2016) and especially after the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, a strong right-wing mobilization has been supported by Evangelical sectors in Brazil. They fomented opposition toward many political and cultural issues of the left, such as reproductive rights, gay and transgender rights, racial and gender equality and sexual education in public schools.

Ben Cowan (2014, 101–125) and Richard Romancini (2018, 85–106) analyzed the recent rise of the “new right,” which allies right-wing agents (liberal politicians, economists

and journalists) with Christian lay people and leaders – mainly Pentecostals and conservative Catholics. These agents have engaged in the secular and religious press – among which are the web portals analyzed here – to vocalize their discontent with the failures of the left-wing administrations in addressing the corruption in public administration and social-economic problems. Additionally, these conservative actors claim that any public policy favoring non-heteronormative practices or groups is against the will of God and the natural order. For instance, the creation of educational anti-homophobic material for public schools in 2010 was disparaged by Evangelical congressmen, who conducted an extensive campaign through the press and social media against its distribution. This material was pejoratively called “the gay kit” (Romancini 2018, 85–106) by these politicians and in 2018 was regularly mentioned in the presidential campaign by the Christian right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro to blame the former administrations for an alleged attack on traditional family values. This is similar to the case of the American cultural wars in the 1970s–1990s (Chapman 2010) in which the Religious Right fought for so-called family values to regulate politics, culture, education and the media.

The right-wing Evangelicals also express their discontent against the mainstream media. The editors of *Gospel Prime* and *Gospel+* accuse *Globo's* telenovelas of indoctrinating immorality, adultery, sexual misconduct and homosexuality. Evangelicals also accuse *Jornal Nacional*, along with other news outlets such as the *Folha de São Paulo*, of conveying lies about Evangelicals and promoting left-wing leaders. Pastor Silas Malafaia attested that the Brazilian dominant media is the major promoter of fake news, according to a long report by *Gospel Prime* (Aragão 2018b).

The strategy of websites like *Gospel Prime* and *Gospel+* is to publish abridged news from secular press, focusing on specific subjects, with spectacular headlines, and spread it on social media. One example is a report that presented the picture of the drag queen Xochi Mochi speaking to children, taken on 14 October 2017 in the Michelle Obama Neighborhood Library, in California, USA, with the headline: “Drag queen, dressed as demon, is chosen to preach ideology of gender to children” (Chagas 2017). Although the article provided accurate information about the event such as the location, it also constructed an alleged gender indoctrination of defenseless children. This was followed by a great number (165) of comments by horrified Christians. Only a minority criticized the sensationalistic headline, along with the hate speech of fellow Christians in the comments.

The portal has a variety of sections, including Israel, Christian World, Brazil, International and Politics. There is a remarkable similarity between the sections and even headlines of these two portals – *Gospel Prime* and *Gospel+*, including the section dedicated to Israel, in which Muslims are portrayed as menaces to the Israeli State, replicating pro-Israel and pro-USA arguments. I highlight two recurring subjects that characterize the fundamentalist activism that reinforces the dichotomy between an imagery of *Us* (that is, Christians) and that of a *Them* (i.e., the World/Infidel/Impure): First, the dread of the so-called ideology of gender, described as indoctrination infused by left-wing educators in order to teach children to choose their gender, rejecting their divine and natural order; and second, the derogatory representation of Afro-Brazilian religions.

In the first case, there is the fierce opposition to the *ideology of gender*. *Gospel Prime's* article “Marisa Lobo is sued due to her opposition to the ideology of gender” (Prime 2018a) states that Christians are living under a gag rule, which victimizes everyone that is against the sexual liberalization. Christian psychologist Marisa Lobo was once a columnist of *Gospel+* (Lobo 2018) and ran for Congress. On the webpages of such portals in 2018, Evangelical politicians (such as congressmen Marcos Feliciano and Magno Malta), opponents to the *ideology of gender*, received attention. Therefore, such coverage supports a conservative and

moral agenda that already managed to integrate gender issues into religious discussions in the National Education Curricular Basis in 2017, mainly due to the pressure of Evangelical congressmen and women (Saldaña 2017).

The second case is a biased representation of Afro-Brazilian religions and left-wing celebrities. One example for this is the news about the Afro-Brazilian singer MC Carol. A *Gospel Prime* headline of 20 April 2018 is: “Author of the funk song ‘I’m smoking crack’ will run for congress for the PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil),” followed by minor text: “MC Carol says she represents the ‘feminist, black and periphery movements’” (Aragão 2018a). Inspired by the example of black and left-wing congresswoman Marielle Franco, who was executed in March 2018 in Rio de Janeiro city, MC Carol claims she wants to fight for children’s rights in poor communities. Her song is a social critique about the lack of options poor children have in the *favelas* of Rio, leading them to drug addiction. The original source of the news was the website *Extra*, which did not focus on the Communist Party, drugs or feminism, unlike *Gospel Prime*’s derogatory portrayal of MC Carol, when it ran the more neutral headline “Influenced by Marielle Franco, MC Carol will run for State congress” (Alfano 2018).

Another example is the news by *Gospel Prime* of Rede Globo’s telenovela *Second Sun*, set in Salvador (in the State of Bahia), a city with a high percentage of Afro Brazilians that is known for the practice of candomblé. Despite the fact that this telenovela is being criticized by the Afro-Brazilian movements for the absence of black actors, *Gospel Prime*’s headline is “New Globo’s novela ‘bets on’ orishas [African deities of Candomblé] in search for ratings” (Aragão 2018c). The original source of this news was *GShow* (from *Globo*), with the headline “‘Second Sun’: videos show first encounter of the cast of the next 9PM novela” (Gshow 2018), demonstrating that each character will have good and evil aspects, associated with different orishas. But in the comment section of the *Gospel Prime*’s article (95 comments were registered on 13 May 2018), there are many criticisms. For instance, the majority rejected the idea of the orishas, accusing it of being a false or demoniac religion propagated by *Globo*, which also was understood to be an evil corporation. At least two people were in favor of the novella and understood it as an opportunity to bring Afro-Brazilian religion into prime time.

Finally, there is the recent case of an Afro-Brazilian history teacher who was repudiated by children and school staff for giving classes on Afro-Brazilian culture. *Gospel+* announced “Teacher give classes on Afro-Brazilian religion with African clothes and is confronted: ‘Go away, Satan!’” (Chagas 2018). The info is taken from *G1.com* (“Teacher is substituted after giving class on African religion in school in Ceará” – Freitas 2018). Most of the comments about this news blame the teacher for expressing her faith through her clothes. While the individual use of crosses or other Christian accoutrements is common in the public sphere, the use of Afro-Brazilian religious clothes still causes uproar. Furthermore, the news at secular outlets focuses on the punishment she received – she was transferred to other functions at the school, not being allowed to give classes, after three children reported feeling sick after her class. The kids pointed her out in the street, saying – “Go away, Satan!,” “I’m gonna get this witch!” (Freitas 2018), and so on.

These are a few of the many examples of news propagated via social media. This is a story to be closely followed, as Brazilian society aims at political renewal after political scandals in the past decade. Since these religious and political agents are battling for the authority over the destiny of the nation, the scholarship on religion and communication may contribute to better understand such processes. The religious media environment – to use Hjarvard’s (2013, 83) concept – of the early 20th century was unidirectional and had limited reach. Conversely, the early 21st-century environment of the religious digital media engaged Christians – Evangelicals and Catholics – in a moral and political campaign, to the point

of electing in 2018 the right-wing candidate Jair Bolsonaro and several congressmen and women with Christian moral agendas, under the slogan *Brazil above everything, God above all*.

Conclusion: challenges for religion, authority and journalism in recent Brazil

Through the conceptual lens of mediatization of religion, this chapter analyzed two aspects of the relation between religion, journalism and authority. The first aspect is journalism on religion in mainstream news media – from the representation of Evangelicals, under the heavy influence of the Catholic cultural settings in the 1990s, to the continuous overrepresentation of the Catholic Church as the epitome of religion, to the detriment of minority religions. The second aspect is the religious media. Once detracted by the mainstream media in the 1990s, the Evangelicals became, in part, opponents to Afro-Brazilian religions, left-wing politicians, feminists and LGBTQ+ activists. It also demonstrated how digital media helped to engage Evangelicals in the public debates and the spread of social panics that favor conservative politicians and celebrities.

A major challenge for the scholarship on religion and journalism in Brazil is its own expansion, whether in Communication studies or other fields of knowledge. Although there is increasing interdisciplinary study of the relations of religion and media in Brazil, the analysis of religion and journalism is rarely central to the scholarship. It may be that the current political context will attract greater attention to this field as religious actors became more powerful and visible in Brazilian society.

My main conclusions are that religions and religious issues have been practically absent from the news media in Brazil since their inception in the early 19th century. This resulted in a lack of information about religious diversity and religious conflicts in the country. In response to the question *who's got the word?* in the Brazilian religious field, the answer would be *the Catholic Church*, considering the mainstream news coverage. There is almost a deadly silence on the other religions present in Brazil and in the world. While mediatization of religion helped to change the nature of religious authority, the way secular journalism broadcasts about religion still reinforces certain types of religious authority to the detriment of others.

However, considering the religious digital media, the answer to that question should include other religious actors, whether leaders or not. For the scholarship on religion, journalism and authority, perhaps the new engagement of Evangelicals and Catholics in digital media and politics will foment studies on the issues of authority. These analyses might observe who claims to influence whom, with which instruments – and to which ends – in the Brazilian plural yet unequal religious field. Transnational and comparative studies in Latin America on religion, journalism and authority, regarding not only the status of traditional institutionalized religions, but also the situation of minority religions in the news, would also be interesting to explore. Such investigations may offer interesting results on how religious authority is perceived by religious leadership and their flock, as well as on the roles played by journalism in such scenarios.

Further readings

Campbell, H. A., ed., 2013. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. London: Routledge.

This book explores case studies in which digital media affected religious practices among adherents and clergy. It addresses discussions on authority, community, rituals and authenticity in the religious realm.

- Hoover, S. M., 1998. *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- The author released one of the first discussions on Religion and Journalism, demonstrating the meanings of religious news coverages in the public sphere and their relation with the notions of religion in contemporary American society.
- Hoover, S. M., ed., 2016. *The Media and Religious Authority*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- This volume presents conceptual analysis and case studies regarding the relation between religion, media and authority, reviewing traditional notions of authority (Weber) at the light of the legacy and new media in the religious fields.
- Garrard-Burnett, G., Freston, P. and Dove, S. C., eds., 2016. *The Cambridge History of Religions in Latin America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- This book offers a wide range of topics to religions in all countries of Latin America, including media and culture, religious diversity and history of the various religious groups existent in the continent.
- Schmidt, B. and Engler, S., eds., 2016. *Handbook of Contemporary Religions in Brazil*. Leiden, Boston: Brill.
- This is an updated volume with texts written by experts in the various Brazilian religious manifestations, contemplating the religions studied in this chapter – Catholicism, Protestantism, Pentecostalism, Afro-Brazilian religions.

Note

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