Abstract: The growing political influence of evangélico Christians in traditionally Catholic Brazil has caught the attention of social and political scientists as well as theologians. Among others, the reasons for two-thirds of the mainly Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal electorate voting for Jair Messias Bolsonaro include a moral agenda concerning human sexuality and the “traditional family,” namely the rejection of abortion under any circumstance and same-sex marriage. This conservative agenda is shared in other countries and churches and shows as “traditionalist” (Benjamin Teitelbaum), especially in Brazil, the USA under Trump, and Russia. At the same time, other, more social aspects of Christian diaconia in caring for the integrity of the body are left aside, although they are foreseen in those churches’ declarations of faith and ethical catechisms. The 2019–2022 government’s blatant failure to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, the appalling rise of hunger, and the destruction of the Amazon rainforest should give rise to what I call an “evangélico sense of shame” as a consequence of the incompatibility of many of the faith convictions of that part of the electorate with Bolsonaro’s stances and actions, retrieving shame as an ethical category. To this end, I analyze biblical notions and theological reflections on shame, as well as publications of evangélico churches with a focus on the largest of its churches in Brazil, the Assemblies of God. Thus, I intend to reclaim an integral diaconia for evangélico churches.

Keywords: shame; Brazil; religion and politics; Christian ethics; integral diaconia

1. Introduction

The past four years in Brazil under the Bolsonaro government (2019–2022) were disruptive in many respects. The invasion of Congress, the President’s Palace, and the Supreme Court, which occurred on 8 January 2023, by a destructive Bolsonarista mob dissatisfied with the lost election, is only the tip of the iceberg (Nicas and Spigariol 2023). What are the ingredients of an attitude that incites such an explosion of violence, seen by its agents not only as a legitimate expression of freedom and dissent but as a necessary action to prevent the new, “wrong” government from coming to power and “abolish” the Supreme Court seen as “ideological” and “against freedom”? One can say that, as in many other contexts today; there is an absolutized, i.e., undebatable, moralistic agenda, comprised of total opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage, combatting so-called “gender ideology” and barring any liberalization of drug consumption, combined with a diffuse opposition to “communism”. Benjamin Teitelbaum (2020) made evident a “traditionalist” agenda formulated namely by Steve Bannon, the late Olavo de Carvalho, and Alexandr Dugin, important political advisors, respectively, for Donald Trump, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, and Vladimir Putin. According to Teitelbaum, among other ingredients, their approaches reflect a mix of religious references, including strands of Sufism and Hinduism, that hold an idea of necessary cataclysmic destructions, following the sequence of the four major casts: “The golden age is the priestly era, the silver belongs to the warriors, the bronze to the merchants, and the dark age to slaves,” the latter representing democracy and communism (Teitelbaum 2020, p. 11). Such belief is potentially a reason why both Trump and Bolsonaro were not
overly preoccupied with the hundreds of thousands of deaths caused by COVID-19 in their countries and, indeed, championed the list of the pandemic’s death toll.\textsuperscript{1} For those who do not think in such a “traditionalist” way, it appears as pure cynicism in view of the victims of COVID-19 that have not found support or assistance.

On the other hand, the social and environmental agenda are downplayed, minorities despised, political correctness ridiculed, and the right of “the majority”—mainly middle to upper-class white males (cf. Souza 2018, 2019)—vindicated. Disinformation was deliberately and consistently applied by the above-mentioned (former) presidents and their supporters and shamelessly emulated by a good number of religious leaders and groups. By a narrow margin—narrower than foreseen—, Bolsonaro was not re-elected to the presidency in October 2022, and former president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva took office again after his earlier mandates between 2003 and 2010 on 1 January 2023. As was to be expected, inspired as he was by Trump, Bolsonaro was not present to hand over the presidential sash. More importantly, though, the positions and consequences of the last four years’ policies are still being felt—and made their most violent face visible on 1/8, featuring a good number of evangélicos, including ministers, with evangélico hymns being sung (da Costa 2023). For weeks, such groups had camped in front of army barracks to press for a military intervention until they were finally dispersed in the aftermath of 1/8. Two-thirds of evangélicos—an electoral base amounting possibly close to one-third of the voting population—had voted for Bolsonaro in 2018, and nearly the same proportion as indicated by polls in 2022 (Mello 2022).

Such alignment of evangélicos\textsuperscript{2}—to the extreme right goes, as I shall argue, against a comprehensive, integrative diaconia. In my view, this is so because it privileges a moralistic against a social agenda and, therefore, reduces care for humans (and nature) to issues linked nearly exclusively to family and sexuality. It also includes a total rejection of left-wing political convictions, considering them \textit{ex ipso} as incompatible with evangélico faith, and negligence of the urgent need for social transformation in a country where poverty is again on the rise (FGV 2022). What I call here “integrative” diaconia, in contrast to such reduction and negligence, refers to a comprehensive understanding of diaconia that cares for human beings—and beyond humanity for animals and the whole of creation—in their integrity, that is, in all aspects of personal and social life, with an emphasis on mutual solidarity, care, and support. This resonates with the recent World Council of Churches’ document on Ecumenical Diakonia (WCC 2022, p. 50; cf. Dietrich et al. 2019) that seeks to “enable churches to learn from each other and their different emphasis and shapes of diaconal ministries, in order to engage in a comprehensive understanding and broad concept of \textit{diaconia}, while keeping in mind their local contexts and living conditions.” Specifically as to the Latin American context, the document sees a need for churches in the region to “pursue an ecumenical \textit{diakonia} which transforms themselves in the first place,” seeking to serve and pursue a “prophetic \textit{diakonia}” (WCC 2022, p. 98) that would “defend the dignity and the rights of the excluded and announce [… ] the values of God’s reign, among which are justice and peace” (WCC 2022, p. 32). Such diaconia, since the early church practice of caring for people in need, is seen as “faith-based due to its distinct identity” and “in its performance [… ] equally obliged to be rights-based” (WCC 2022, p. 38).

Although such a concept is barely used and discourse on diaconia is scarce—but existing (von Sinner 2012, 2021b)—, evangélico churches in Brazil have become known for their effective integration of marginalized people who acquire a sense of self-worth and “decency” and receive skills and leadership training (cf. Mariz 1994; Corten 1999; von Sinner 2012). The poorest of the poor are in the evangélico, namely the Pentecostal churches, among which the Assemblies of God (Assembleias de Deus—AD) are the largest. Issues of poverty and its overcoming are, therefore, on its radar. Many of those churches have been collaborating for years with government programs to overcome poverty. They are also the “blackest” church tradition in Brazil (de Oliveira 2004), albeit with very little perception of racism and discourse against it.
In what follows, I shall first give a brief overview of evangélico absence and then presence in politics (2); reflect on what a “sense of shame” could and should be from a conceptual, biblical, and theological point of view (3); explore to what extent contradictions in evangélico convictions could lead to such a sense of shame (4) and finally advocate an integrative diaconia as an amplification of a usually moralized and, namely, sexualized agenda.

2. Evangélicos and Politics in Brazil

Evangélicos were traditionally unwilling to position themselves politically or else tacitly submissive to and/or aligned with the forces in power. Since the mid-1980s, however, in the context of the Constituent Assembly (1986–1987) that sealed the transition to democracy after more than twenty years of a military regime (1964–1985), they have left their intra-ecclesial cloister to participate in politics at all levels (Freston 2001, 2008; von Sinner 2012). The traditional motto “a believer does not mingle with politics” turned into “brother votes for brother”.3 The still recent AD’s declaration of faith affirms that given “our condition as citizens, [...] as Christian citizens we can vote, be voted and participate in the organization and activity of state power” (Convenção Geral das Assembleias de Deus 2017, p. 150).

Moving from a kind of quietism to a more active role in society is, in principle, very positive, certainly legal, and even more legitimate. When it becomes a dispute for hegemony, however, not only in the religious but also in the political field, aiming to impose values and practices on all citizens, it becomes a serious challenge to a pluralist society and the secular state. The responsibility for preventing this would fall precisely on the state. During the past four years, however, and even still now in terms of local and state administration, it has rather reinforced this search for hegemony and the consequent dispute.

Historically, evangélicos had to earn their citizenship (von Sinner 2012, 2021a). Non-Catholics (acatólicos) had been admitted into the country from 1824, when the Imperial Constitution of independent Brazil allowed for their presence and worship, as long as it occurred in private houses that would not resemble temples. Catholicism continued as the established State religion until the Republic, which was proclaimed on 15 November 1889, and its following decrees and Constitution. Until then, members of immigrant churches were second-class citizens. There was no secular, public registry of their birth (baptism) or marriage or even a place to be buried, as all these were in the hands of the Catholic priests. From the early 20th century onwards, however, with the emergence and rise of the Pentecostal movement, evangélicos became a very considerable portion of the population. The latest census of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE 2010) in 2010 counted 21% of the population as evangélicos, over 42 million. The data of the 2022–2023 census are still to be finalized and published, but a Datafolha poll in 2019 indicated as much as 31% for the evangélico share of the population, which would amount to about 66 million. At the same time, the self-declared Catholic population appears to have shrunk from 90% to around 50% in only four decades (Balloussier 2020). In absolute numbers, Brazil is still the most Catholic but also the most Pentecostal country today.

Faced with long-standing discrimination and relegation to a supposedly foreign import considered illegitimate, the trajectory of gradual conquest of space and recognition by evangélico churches contributed to the emergence of a “Pentecostal people” that is aware of its role and its weight in the political balance (Burity 2020). The anti-culturalism and invisibility of the “tupiniquim” [i.e., typically Brazilian] Protestantism” (de Alencar 2005) gave way to the “Gospel explosion” (Cunha 2009) and to the monumentalism of the Universal Church of God’s Kingdom (Gomes 2011), culminating in the construction of the so-called Temple of Solomon in São Paulo that was inaugurated in 2014 with a massive attendance of members drawn from the highest political positions. Beyond numerous references to Israel, from where all the bricks for the building were imported, there was also a choir from South Africa—South Africa being the second most important stronghold of that church after Brazil itself (von Sinner 2021a, pp. 195–208). The lust for power seems to have overshadowed any sense of shame as to the objectively terrible health, social,
and environmental situation in Brazil. Moral issues have indeed been ingredients of a conservative agenda for a long time—and persisted in the Catholic church alongside a progressive social agenda. However, being complacent or even complicit with police violence, featuring a lack of sensitivity in relation to the poor and the destruction of the environment, and even a preference for economic neo-liberalism has by no means been a central and necessary part of conservativism. It is true that shame seems no longer to come into place when the issue is corruption—if the others (especially the “communists”) are discovered practicing it, shame on them, but one seems to find it natural when practiced for one’s own interest and, obviously, in favor of whatever one considers the Gospel’s cause. Strangely, even drug traffickers that convert to an evangélico church no longer see being an evangélico trafficker as an oxymoron but rather use their power to reduce the space for other religious expressions and increase the space for their own (da Cunha 2015).

It is for such reasons I came to ponder (see already von Sinner 2022) if what would be necessary to a more critical view on conservatism, bolsonarism, and their mingling with politics on the part of evangélicos should not see a sense of shame emerge in view not of any external criteria, but of their very own principles.

3. A Sense of Shame—Conceptual, Biblical, and Theological Elements

According to the Grande Dicionário Houaiss (n.d.), a renowned Portuguese dictionary, pudor—which I translate as “sense of shame”—indicates a “feeling of shame, shyness, malaise, caused by anything capable of offending decency, modesty, innocence […] 4. feeling of shame regarding acts that hurt the character qualities of an individual, such as decency, honesty, honour, etc.” (cf. de Oliveira 2018, p. 26). As Strecker (2018, p. 187) recalls, the English shame encompasses both the internal sense of shame and the external shaming, while French, as a Latin language, distinguishes into pudere and honte—the same happens in Portuguese with pudor and vergonha, respectively. The latter stems from Latin verecundia. As Kaster shows, in Ancient Rome, verecundia indicated worrying about one’s place and proper action in society, binding “the free members of a civil community” (Kaster 2005, p. 27). This is visible in the Portuguese expression “tomar vergonha na cara,” literally “take shame in one’s face,” indicating a moment when one’s face should turn red because of an appalling infraction of social convention and morality. As in the case of corruption, such a phrase is usually deployed when people precisely seem to lack any such reaction of shame (see Cortella and de Barros Filho 2015). The Latin pudor, says Kaster, is more complex. Differently from the verecundus, which was a positive distinction, pudor was seen primarily as a “negative” emotion creating discomfort; “I experience pudor when I see my self being seen as discredited, when the value that I or others grant that self is not what I would have it be” (Kaster 2005, p. 29). Precisely for such discomfort as it should indeed produce in view of social morality, in Portuguese, I emphasize pudor.

I am aware of the great evidence of “shame” in recent years, with a host of academic studies, especially in the Northern Hemisphere (e.g., Link-Wiecezek 2015; Grund-Wittenberg and Poser 2018; Henriksen and Mesel 2021; Pfeiderer and Evers 2022, all quoting the pertinent literature), usually in connection with guilt and sin. Despite contextual differences, I believe these insights are helpful also for the present discussion within the Brazilian context and possibly beyond. However, I do not consider here externally inflicted shame nor basic self-shame that inflicts great suffering on those it afflicts and needs to be overcome, important as this is (e.g., Hilgers 2006). I also do not refer to the meanings of pudor related to intimacy. The pursuit of “decency” has long been an important feature of evangélico morality. It was able to elevate their self-esteem and recognition for their respectable conduct. Following Kaster, in Ancient Rome, they would be called verecundi. It is true that the focus of this morality has been on sexuality, sexual orientation, and the traditional family, considered “Christian”—which differs little from the Catholic environment. However, it does not to be disconnected from other issues of more social and environmental nature, which are my main interest here.
“Sense of shame,” as I understand it here, is the feeling of embarrassment in the face of acts and pronouncements that offend morality, in this case, social morality. Guiding the concrete rules of morality, when ethical principles are perceived as being offended, it should provoke a reaction not only of a cognitive but also of an emotional character, making people blush—literally or metaphorically. It has the potential to be fostered and exploited in order to disengage people from blind adherence to a project that offends their morality. In differentiation from guilt, in psychoanalytic terms, this is not the tension between ego and super-ego but rather between the ego and the ego-ideal. It is the injury of the self and not the other. As German psychoanalyst Micha Hilgers (2006, pp. 18–19) states: “Shame has, in terms of developmental psychology, the important function of interfering with the unquestioned naturalness of the sense of self, thus bringing about and fostering a consciousness about the self and the other.” That is to say: it brings down a false security and allows one to reflect on one’s own position, understanding that one is shamefully wrong, not only punctually, but in a generalized way. Swiss psychiatrist Daniel Hell (2019), in his book called “Praise of Shame” (Lob der Scham), says shame “draws a person’s attention to herself” and “says: your ‘Self’ is under threat” (Hell 2019, p. 89). Albeit not identical, it is connected to guilt, but guilt is not necessarily perceived as such; only together with a sense of shame does it create sentiments of remorse (ibid., p. 90; Heller 1985). Moreover, rather than being the feature of an inferiority complex, “shame presupposes [...] values and a certain self-esteem” (Hell 2019, p. 110).

In his extensive ethics of shame located within the emotional turn, German Protestant theologian Klaas Huizing (2020, p. 40) defends as a central thesis that “an ethical person is constituted only in passing through an experience of shame and its implied imperatives.” For Huizing, “the most important agency of divine love is shame as loving shaming [liebende Beschämung] that aims at a training of character or formation of virtue” (Huizing 2020, p. 41)—the human tendency of finding concrete guilt more bearable than diffuse shame results in violence. Thus, even before Lévinas’ central imperative: “Thou shalt not kill,” the imperative should be “shame on you” (Huizing 2020, p. 60f.). Belonging to humanity and society is tantamount to such a sense of shame. When groups, however—such as fundamentalists and extremists of all sorts—do not want to belong or exclude large parcels of society from belonging, a sensorium of shame is lacking, which also greatly reduces the restraint from violence. For German philosopher Ernst Tugendhat (2001, p. 211; cf. Huizing 2020, p. 43), as moral sentiments, shame and indignation are “shared sentiments.” Thus, Huizing, for whom Tugendhat is an important reference, is critical of Protestant ways of conceiving shame as a virtue on too individual a level, leaving out interpersonal and social aspects. Rather than a protection of the individual—after all, blushing gives one’s shame publicly away—, Huizing defends: “I feel shame, therefore I am,” with reference to Jan Stenger (2009; cf. Huizing 2020, p. 60) and shame in antiquity. Recovering shame in a sapiential mode is, for Huizing, also a means of overcoming the exaggerated emphasis on sin in Christian theology (Huizing 2017), which would need an additional reflection beyond my scope here. Important, however, for my purpose in the present article is the eminently ethico-theological and practical rather than psychoanalytical (important as it is) take on shame. Indeed, and Huizing precisely defends this, one has to overcome a tendency to understand shame only as a humiliating experience—without denying the importance of such comprehension, which is rightly being questioned by many contemporary authors. Shame can, indeed, be seen as a necessary ethical and formative experience and, reflectively, as an ethical category.

Although an individually experienced phenomenon, shame can only arise from the interaction between human beings. Therefore, the reaction of the persons around oneself is tantamount. Shame yields to pride when the surrounding majority condones a certain attitude or action, reinforcing that it is right rather than wrong. If the majority is what reinforces pride, the Gospel, not guided by majorities but by coherence in faith, should create and reinforce a sense of shame. Shame, guilt, and sin (see the volume edited by Pfleiderer and Evers 2022, most of whose chapters dialogue with Huizing), although
distinct, are quite close in this perspective. An emblematic and often-cited case is the so-called fall in Gen. 3. The axis of shame suddenly perceived by the first human beings is not sexuality, despite emerging from the consciousness of nakedness. For the biblical scholar Alexandra Grund-Wittenberg (2015, p. 4), this is like “a dowry [...] of the knowledge of good and evil: shame accompanies it (Gen. 3:7), the tree of knowledge produces a sense of shame”, as expressed in God’s question to Adam: “Where are you?”, to which Adam replies: “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself,” and God asks, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (Gen. 3:10–11). Shame presupposes self-perception as well as knowing to be perceived by others. The other is here represented by God, but also by fellow human beings. The human being recognizes having lost innocence and won the onus and bonus of responsibility, of answering to God and the other. It is interesting to note that while “shame” is mentioned explicitly in the Genesis story—2, 25: “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed [viv hitpol.]”, “sin” does not come up as a word—it does not occur before Gen. 4, 7 (Schmid 2018, p. 280). “Knowledge,” on the other hand, has no sexual connotation in Gen. 2–3. Shame is not a consequence of sin but of the knowledge of good and evil, which implies recognizing the distance of and lowliness before God, as Grund-Wittenberg (2022) argues referring to Claus Westermann’s commentary on Genesis 1–11. “Thus, the constructive side of shame and fear of shame are highlighted: Both can, indeed, beware of incorrect actions” (Grund-Wittenberg 2022, p. 156). In 3, 7, after having eaten “the fruit” from “the tree”, “the human being” (ha’adam in Hebrew, with the definite article) and “the woman” “both” recognize they are naked; they apparently experience shame, as they make “loincloths for themselves” with fig leaves. The word “shame” is not mentioned, but in contrast to Gen. 2, 25 obviously implied. The central occurrence is one of shame and not sin or guilt.

Shame can, then, be seen as the affective recognition of evil that the responsible, ethical subject acknowledges. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1997, p. 117) states in his lecture on Creation and Fall: “in their shame, human beings acknowledge their limit,” and continues: “the human being’s shame is the reluctant reference to Revelation, to the limit, to the other, to God.” For Bonhoeffer, shame is a central part of human life. In the Genesis narrative, the limit set by God—with the prohibition of eating “the fruit” from “the tree”—is transgressed and only thus emerges as a limit. As humankind puts itself in the center, it is on its own, alone, a consequence of striving—and succeeding—to be sicut deus. While the tendency to see the “fall” as human hubris of wanting resemble God is questionable both from the viewpoint of contemporary exegesis (Schmid 2018; Grund-Wittenberg 2015, 2022) and of theological developments (Munz 2009; Huizing 2020), the notion of “limit” is still relevant, because it highlights the potential transgressiveness of nakedness, as it exposes extreme vulnerability and can be used to destroy one’s self-esteem in view of a public’s disdainful look. In the Paradise narrative, it is thus not a mere detail that God clothes them with “garments of skins” (Gen. 3, 21). Clothing of nakedness, both literally and metaphorically, is an important protection and helps to maintain one’s integrity as a person. While shame is tantamount, shaming is sinful, indeed “the shedding of blood,” as the rabbinic tradition states, turning blush into blanching (quoted in Grund-Wittenberg 2022, p. 161). Crüsemann (2010) rightly reminds us of the odd iconographical tradition that nearly consistently shows the first couple being expelled naked (at best with their intimate parts covered by a fig leaf) from paradise—and not clothed, as the text would suggest. Rather than emerging protected in the outer world, they are subject to shaming.

Thus, shame indicates the very humanity of being: humans are now responsive and responsible, they are vulnerable in their own and others’ eyes, and they need protection to survive shame and shaming. Precisely for this reason, however, shame can be a productive and even necessary indicator of humanity that is able to sense shame in relation to its own failure while watching on to the other’s suffering.
4. Evangélico Convictions and Contradictions—A Reason for Shame?

Based on what has just been argued and in view of many of Bolsonaro’s positions and actions, there are indeed contradictions in evangélico morality that should become evident as a moral dilemma and produce shame. To arrive at this conclusion, I use as reference documents produced by evangélico churches, namely the AD, and reflections on them published by Brazilian evangélico authors. While the AD, for example, clearly rejects the death penalty and declares, when commenting on the commandment “you shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13), that “the right to life is a personal and inalienable good; its preservation and protection are part of our responsibility as administrators of life” (Convenção Geral das Assembleias de Deus 2017, p. 159), Bolsonaro affirmed, as did much of the population, that “a good bandit is a dead bandit,” hence advocating the death penalty (Xavier 2019, p. 102). It also seems inconsistent that such a person, who is in his third marriage, be considered the main protector and advocate for the traditional family (de Alencar 2019, p. 20). Apparently, the opportunity seen in the then-candidate and now-former president seems to have overcome such constraints. The disastrous performance of the Bolsonaro administration in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, including investing in provenly ineffective and even dangerous substances for preventive treatment such as chloroquine and ivermectin, the delay in providing vaccines for all the population and the discouragement rather than the encouragement of the use of masks and social distancing measures, and, not least, the total insensitivity towards the over 699,310 deaths (as of 10 March 2023) caused by COVID-19 in Brazil—could it not indicate that the demons of shame have returned to haunt evangélico minds? Would they not be increasingly constrained by an evangélico sense of shame?

This is the line of argument in a recent book by the Baptist journalist Ricardo Alexandre. The book bears the title, “and the truth will set you free” (John 8, 32), echoing a phrase repeatedly quoted by Bolsonaro himself. The notion of truth has become highly ambiguous, though, for Bolsonaro and his followers. For them, the truth seems to be whatever they want to believe or write on Twitter, however false or unsubstantiated it may be. Alexandre, on his part, points out that the correct position would be to act as the Christians of Beroea, who “examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17: 11) as Paul and Silas claimed them to be. Truth has to be established by critical investigation. For this reason, a project investigating evangélico disinformation also refers to the Beroeans. It is in this sense that Alexandre seeks to promote questions and discussions, having Scripture as a reference. When criticizing the messianic personalism of Christian leaders and their rejection of any questioning, he states that “it is not in the Bible [...] that one finds the inspiration of so many current religious leaders, but in the propaganda of authoritarian regimes” (Alexandre 2020, pp. 24–25).

Another critique comes from Neo-Calvinist Baptist Guilherme de Carvalho (2020), who for nine months worked in the Bolsonaro administration in a senior position at the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights. When he resigned, he highlighted Bolsonaro’s (ab)use of God’s name and affirmed that “the rise of COVID-19 opened up an unprecedented crisis in the government, which did not turn into a breakdown because emergency commitment to the nation overrode shame and lack of leadership.” At the same time, it exposed the highly problematic action of the administration’s ideological core group in a spirit Carvalho considers contrary to the Gospel: revanchist, resentful, nationalistic, anti-scientific, authoritarian, with disregard for the human person and the environment. In fact, beyond mere preferences of position in the political field as they are normal to any democracy, Bolsonaro and his kind enrobed themselves in messianic terms. During an interview with GloboNews even before the election, in August 2018, Bolsonaro declared: “I am a Christian” and went on to suggest the supernatural nature of his success: “Look at the popular support I’m getting. Isn’t it unimaginable that this is happening? How did I do it? When I speak of ‘God’s mission,’ I am thinking: what will my motto be? What’s my flag going to be? So I turned to Jn. 8:32, ‘Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’”, thus promoting the idea of his divine mission (Alexandre 2020, p. 26).
This understanding was adopted by many evangélicos. It is, then, not only the political alignment between powerful evangélico voices and Bolsonaro that is striking—after all, it could be instrumental, as is common in politics, on specific issues, such as the waiving of the considerable churches’ tax debts. There is, among some, a devotion, exacerbation, and even idolatry of Bolsonaro as a savior of the homeland chosen directly by God. Ever since his candidacy, the stabbing he suffered on 6 September 2018 and subsequent hospitalization was taken advantage of by conveying the image of a martyr. It even came to be known as “holy stabbing” (Valério 2020, p. 116). “God acted and deflected the stab,” declared Flávio Bolsonaro, one of the candidate’s sons, now a senator, the day after the attack. “The stabbing greatly reinforced among evangélicos the sign that the election of Bolsonaro will occur by the will of God,” said the evangélico representative Sóstenes Cavalcante (Alexandre 2020, pp. 26–27). “Bolsonaro was often treated by relentless supporters as someone endowed with exceptional qualities, who inspires such confidence that some speak of him as if they had direct access to his real convictions and motives, as if they inhabited his head. [...] More than one evangélico supporter [i.e., research informant] referred to Bolsonaro as the bearer of a divine mission to rid Brazil of corruption and repair the morale of the people” (de Paula et al. 2021, p. 35).

Many more examples could be given. God became an often quoted element in discourses, as in the Bolsonaro government’s motto: “Brazil above everything, God above everybody.” The fatherland, the human Bolsonaro, and God idolatrized, I would say. A good dose of shame seems to be appropriate.

5. Shame as an Ethical Category for an Integrative Diaconia

As we have seen, shame is related to responsibility, to sensitivity for one’s own and the other’s vulnerability. What I have called here “integrative” diaconia refers to a comprehensive understanding of diaconia that insists on care for human beings—and beyond humanity for animals and the whole of creation—in their integrity. I tried to show that it is not only reductive but wrong to restrict the so-called “fall” in the Paradise narrative—itself a highly misleading concept in the context of Gen. 2–3 unless one wants to speak of a “fall into shame” (Crüsemann 2010)—to sexualized nakedness and sexuality as such. Therefore, the reduction of the public positions and actions of evangélicos to matters of family, gender, and sexuality, as well as implicit—concerning the COVID disaster—and explicit—concerning a matter-of-fact death penalty—the exaltation of violence is inconsistent with what I propose as integrative diaconia. In turn, such integrative diaconia is compatible with even a conservative evangélico agenda, as visible in the critique of the Bolsonaro government by evangélicos and with their documents of reference.

Of course, also human sexuality, partnerships, and the family deserve ethical reflection and guidance. It is evident that issues touching on intimacy, where persons are particularly vulnerable—but can also realize embodied love to its utmost degree—are especially delicate. This, however, must not lead to making them a complete taboo, as is, unfortunately, so common in churches. Probably more often than not, it leads to judgment on very strict rules rather than to understanding, sensitivity, and loving care. If this field is already in dire need of new perceptions and conceptions, all the more it is necessary to open up ethics to social issues and transformation. As I have tried to show, cultivating, experiencing, and articulating a sense of shame—understood as an ethical category—has a very important role to play in constituting the ethical subject in the midst of their peers and before God. Without such affective reaction, ethical reflection and restraint are likely to continue absent, giving way to indifference and self-interest.

The AD and similar churches have the poorest of the poor in their midst. Acquiring “decency,” for instance, by wearing a suit or a long skirt, in contrast to common everyday clothing, is a form of protection and affirmation of self-worth against the usual shame. Believers start to see themselves as citizens worthy of dignity and respect. While they know well what is needed to survive in such precarious situations, this does not lead automatically to a critical perception of structures of injustice, inequality, oppression, and
exploitation. To seek sexual decency in the midst of often highly chaotic, little responsible, and precarious sexualities in peripheries is a highly understandable move. An integrative diaconia, as in principle set out in the denomination’s referential documents, would seek to amplify care for the body and call to shame not only on sexual but social grounds. “Caring for bodies—whether the personal body, the social bodies of community and society, as well as the bodies of natural habitats and biospheres—is a form of service that honours both creation and incarnation” (Deifelt and Hofmann 2021, p. 54).

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**Notes**


2. I deliberately use the Portuguese term because the English “evangelical” does not adequately cover this highly diverse religious segment, composed mainly of a host of Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal communities but also of a wide range of independent ministries and a small group of traditional Protestant churches.

3. Translation of terms and quotations in languages other than English are my own unless otherwise stated.

4. In other studies carried out, official Sunday School material and the monthly paper Mensageiro da Paz were analyzed; see (Majewski 2010; von Sinner 2012, 2022). A study of this material with AD positionings in relation to the Bolsonaro government is underway.


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**References**


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