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SITUATION AND PROJECTIONS IN CYBERSPACE OF THE NEOCONSERVATIVE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES IN THE PANDEMIC PERIOD

Pedro Alvares Sifontes

Research from the Department of
Socio-religious Studies of the Center for
Psychological and Sociological Research.
Havana Cuba

Yunier de la Rúa Marín

DESR-CIPS

Master of Science in Social and Philosophical
Studies on Religion. University of Havana,
Cuba

Research from the Department of
Socio-religious Studies of the Center for
Psychological and Sociological Research.
Havana Cuba

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The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has marked a before and after in the development of multiple processes, practices and habits in modern society, forcing it to find new ways and forms and enhance paths of socialization from a distance. Religion has also seen this need to find new formulas and promote paths little traveled.

This historical moment where the digital domain has expanded overwhelmingly. The different media and social networks are valued as a strategic space to proselytize, but also to maintain the daily practice of the faith of its faithful. Its presence and activity are advancing on the Internet and the number and influence of news agencies specialized in religion is rapidly growing for an increasingly broader market.

Contemporary culture suffers alterations not only in form, but also in substance, due to the intense mediations of information technology and the media that modulate the way in which human beings relate to others, as well as the current ways in which knowledge is transmitted and generated.

One of the characteristic features of the new ways of communicating and generating knowledge has been the prevalence of the image as a support for language, which diminishes the importance of oral language—typical of the cultural transmission of traditional societies—and written language—that allowed the development of modernity and the creation of communities imagined as the nation. Régis Debray called this new situation the mediatization of the videosphere, which consists of the fact that images have replaced the discourses that were used as a support for dogmas and theological thought, establishing a visual regime that he called videocracy.

In this work Debray exposes that the power of the image is displacing universal values and the ideals of extramundane salvation,

replacing them with pleasant feelings and a project to obtain monetary success in this world. This way, he externalizes the emotional and neoliberal matrix of the theology of prosperity, one of the successful propositions of the neo-Pentecostal package that has been enthroned in Latin American evangelical practice.

For the Mexican researcher Rene de la Torre in the religious field, the image is impacting the production of a novel videograce. This concept is based on the adaptive power of religious expressions in social, economic and cultural contexts imposed by modernity and scientific and technical advances. The hypothesis is that video grace is affecting the deregulation of institutions specialized in controlling and managing the secrets of salvation in the religious field, and at the same time contributes to revitalizing the pragmatic, emotional and symbolic sense of religiosity.

It has become common for the media to provide a channel for virtual rituals or liturgies - televised masses are broadcast, prayer chains are created on social networks, and saints are even paid for favors received with PayPal. Together, these mediations, they are transforming the traditional and institutional ways of accessing grace, miracles, blessings, purification, transcendences, protection against the evil eye and contact with the world of evil spirits.

In this process, religious teachings, images and rituals are hybridizing with entertainment, consumption, merchandise, and even there is not always a line that distinguishes religious belief from the impacts of science fiction.

This produces changes in the liturgy, in the image of the religious group and influences doctrine. Sacred texts are consulted in a circumstantial and decontextualized way, often without the guidance of a professional. Other times it is the leader himself who imposes his reading according to his purposes. The

transcendent also changes its expression and the use of market instruments or tools that are imposed in everyday life is now common.

For the authors, this concept of video grace expands with the emergence of the digital world and shows an infinite number of forms and contents that renew the image, even making it increasingly a process that can be manipulated from the construction of any media product in the hands of any individual. This democratization of the media space where “everyone” produces and “everyone” consumes, without professional mediation, using the digital space on a religious level could be classified as Cybergrace. **Cybergrace allows the religious message to be individualized, increasingly adapting religious doctrine and liturgy to the needs of the individual and his or her most intimate characteristics.**

This concept is also linked to the so-called cyber churches or the so-called “online religion” which have privileged websites not only as sources of information for churches and religious movements, but as spaces and media where religious experimentation occurs.

Cybergrace legitimizes cyberspace as a place—not a place that conditions the transcendental life of the religious, through it gifts are shared and miracles are achieved in an individual and highly personalized way “on time, on line” without the need for a space, religious community or surpassing it in importance.

This cyber media boom and consequently the practice of cyber grace in evangelical churches has had its splendor during the development of the global crisis generated by COVID-19 and has been the trunk of salvation for many religious expressions. It has been widely used by neoconservative and fundamentalist positions to maintain evangelical membership and penetrate followers of other religions and other non-religious people. Cuba has not been exempting from this trend and its staging is increasingly visible

in the face of the social changes that have been taking place on the island in the last five years.

RELIGION AND COVID IN CUBA, ITS MOST IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS

Religions in Cuba have also seen the need to adapt to the pandemic situation. Within the adaptive processes, the migration towards the digital space stands out and all the means offered by ICT have enhanced individual actions. Since a period prior to the pandemic, different religious expressions have been exploring the advantages and potential that these media offer to expand their message, trying to reach more strongly a sector considered important by all social actors: Youth.

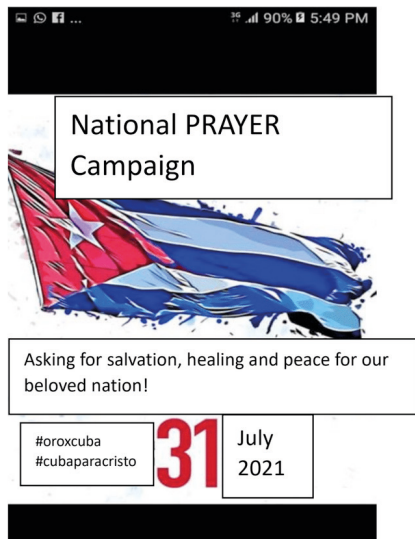
The pandemic has been an ideal moment for the strengthening of fundamentalist positions in several of the Cuban evangelical churches. The crisis situation in different dimensions that encourages uncertainty and fear, the need for an incentive or protection in the face of the unknown and the search for simple answers that are not always well directed are some of the causes of the population’s approach to these extremist evangelical groups, and their apocalyptic positions.

This call to the end of days and to repentance and conversion as a means of salvation in the face of future catastrophe was the discourse that prevailed in the first weeks of the pandemic, and continued throughout the months.

It is demonstrable that in times of crisis, and the multiple crises that we are going through as a civilization in general and as a society in particular are undeniable, many people seek refuge from their anguish in religious beliefs. It is evident that in the midst of these crises, strong and charismatic leaderships that provide certainty and support are uncritically accepted by the masses who generally need stability and trust. This makes us defend the

idea that they are far from diminishing the growth of fundamentalist organizations and the orthodox radicalization of many religious expressions that until now have not behaved this way.

One of the most visualized characteristics during this period has been the intensive use of the traditional spaces of the churches for the formation of a legitimizing sense, in the attempt to promote these fundamentalist political positions and, at the same time, the biblical doctrinal foundations that support them: publications, cult sermons, vigils, fasts arranged through social networks with objectives focused on topics of interest, with the aim of building a social base with a hegemonic discourse.



A total of 3 trends have been observed that bring together a variety of positions and opinions on the economic, political, social, cultural and ethical situation within the Protestant or evangelical religious field. A part of the churches shows liberal positions, others remain in the conservative camp and another group of denominations participate in fundamentalist positions. It is very difficult to establish them clearly due to the nuances and variable discourses of each one. Any future study that is carried out has to take

into consideration, that each position can vary according to the current situation, the preparation of the leaders, the influence of the community, customs, even the individual position of the religious and especially the religious leader.

The use of ICTs forces us to be more creative and multifaceted, networks allow the unfolding and improvement of the image of the church in addition to reaching a broader audience, whether religious or not, hence the rapid improvement of audiovisual products of the same and the creation of true Christian production houses or the link to diverse production companies, this requires greater financing and the formation of groups of specialists in promotion, realization, production, etc., in short, greater specialization. An obvious example of the above is the digital channel "Luz Visión" that is distributed in the "Package" and that has maintained its deliveries against all odds, gaining an audience that consumes it and that on many occasions is immune to any campaign. of public good from the state media because they simply DO NOT WATCH national TV, much less informative spaces or Spots with these topics because they consider them negative and diabolical.



Leaders are beginning to be prepared to achieve greater impact on audiovisual products.

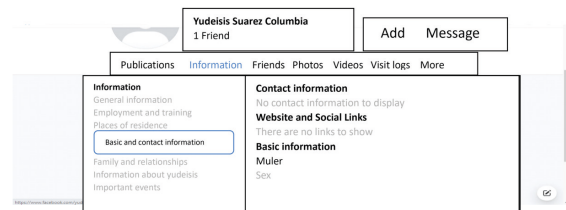
This year has seen the emergence and consolidation of alternative evangelical leaders and opinion leaders using and making part

of these groups of cultural personalities, scientists, especially doctors and other personalities who can generate opinions and influence decision-making. For example, the Methodist Church's use of a group of medical specialists to support or complement the religious criteria of its leaders. Besides, personalities, musicians, plastic artists, radio and television artists, although sometimes they also resort to Bots and fake accounts to establish states of opinion, as in the case of an alleged Doctor who addressed a letter to fellow First Secretary of the Party Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez on behalf of many mothers concerned about the teaching of gender ideology in Cuban schools.

to achieve a rapprochement with conservatives, although the latter have more points of contact, preparation and interests similar to the latter, this propensity will denote changes in the speeches and liturgies to adapt to the characteristics of the denominations to be influenced.

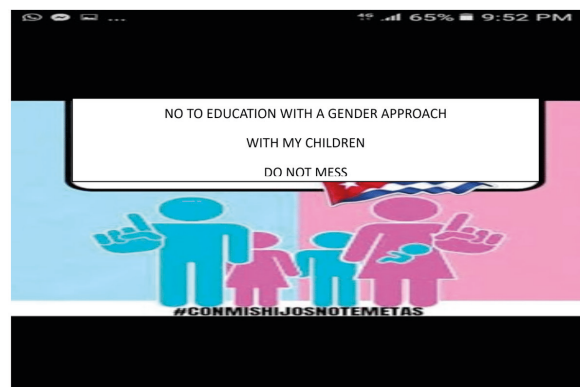
Along these lines, it is important to rescue the conclusions of a philological investigation by Ernesto Wong García, which in his conclusions warns that:

“Religious fundamentalist discourse, being essentially reactionary, is defined and built on antagonistic oppositions (in line with its Manichean vision). We have seen these oppositions in the form of dichotomous discursive representations, which reduce the discursive field to two opposing positions, without space for third parties. In this structure, religious fundamentalist groups present themselves as victims, as (representatives of a) majority and as moral and rational authority; and they construct their ideological Other as victimizers and as an immoral and irrational non-representative minority.



The letter is the only interaction of this profile on the official page of the “Ríos de Agua Viva” Church and it uses *connishijosnotemetas*, which indicates that this Latin American right-wing movement is gaining strength on the island.

At the same time, it is a discourse focused on the group itself, to the point that it dedicates very little space to the recognition of its ideological Other. The reference to this, although it is inevitably present, is almost always made in a depersonalized or diffuse manner.



It is a highly connotative discourse, which seeks to persuade through emotional reactions to promote states of opinion that are unfavorable towards the ideological Other and favorable to one's own group. However, it also incorporates calls for supposed rationality, specifically through pseudoscientific arguments. It thus adapts to discursive needs, inserting within itself fragments of other discourses, such as scientific or official ones.

A religious discourse is observed tending towards polarization between liberal and fundamentalist tendencies, as well as tendencies

It is a discourse that presents itself as the heir and defender of national history and identity, which it considers to be under attack, which it assimilates to its own belief system and

which it uses to legitimize itself in the discursive field. Finally, the analysis suggests that, within the religious fundamentalist ideology, its different components are organized in a hierarchy where cultural hegemony has priority.

A trend towards neo-Pentecostal charismatic doctrine and liturgy is increasingly observed with the enthronement of Church growth techniques, prosperity theology and spiritual warfare, increasingly active cults and the use of symbology and practices increasingly distant from the doctrines. original (blessed oil, saving cloth to cure diseases)

THEMES THAT PREDOMINATE IN THE CUBAN EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT DISCOURSE

The thematization of a hegemonic discourse that focuses on matters of maximum interest such as the family code, key in the fundamentalist escalation and closely associated with the daily life of the entire town. They are not interested in technical controversies, but rather in having a social impact where they can exert pressure. An entire campaign was organized not only to react to the family code but to position itself against it with concrete proposals. It is intended that the discussion will transcend the temples and be positioned on the national public agenda.



WE ARE NOT OLD TO MARRY, TO VOTE, TO HAVE A LICENSE AND DRIVE, I CAN'T EVEN PREPARE FOOD OR KEEP MYSELF ALONE.

AND DO YOU THINK I HAVE THE MATURITY TO DECIDE TO CHANGE MY GENDER?

AS AN ADULT YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT ME AND NOT HURT ME.

This point is fundamentally risky because if the interests of the conservative anti-rights agenda prevail in Cuba, we will see how an attempt will be made to reverse Cuban women's access to abortion, for example.

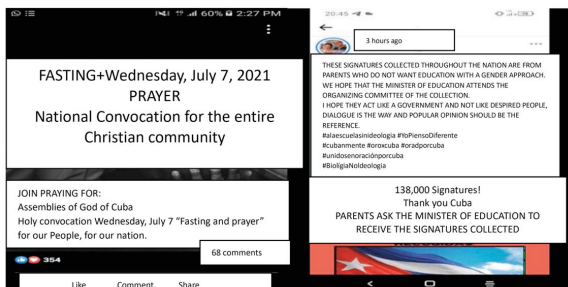
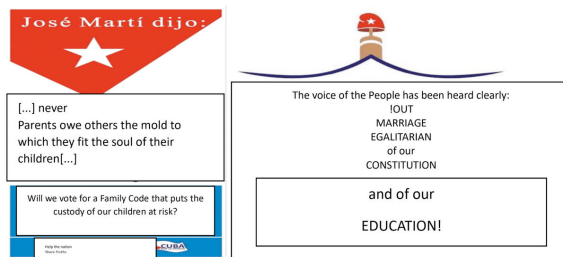
For most of the year, but intensely starting in June, there was a strong controversy about the CENESEX campaign for active sexual education in the country's educational centers, with public positions being given by 14 evangelical churches openly proclaiming against it. and calling for popular boycotts against this CENESEX campaign and the Comprehensive Sexuality Education Program with a Gender Approach and Sexual and Reproductive Rights in the National Education System directed by the MINED. Signatures were collected against the Family Code project, publicly proclaiming the result of 138 thousand signatures.

This issue is maintained and encouraged during the pandemic, interdenominational alliances are formed, some as a space to coordinate positioning and common strategies in regions, localities and communities. The Alliance of Cuban Evangelical Churches, which is nothing more than the organization of a fundamentalist platform, is articulated in a programmatic manner and has taken part in the actions of these groups during the pandemic.

There is a clear intention to position itself in public spaces with discriminatory, elitist, homophobic and patriarchal proposals, although these are not characteristics solely attributable to these groups since these



are features of our society in general that are enhanced in these spaces. At this time, contacts between evangelical representatives and the so-called pastors' fasts increased when the new normal was declared in the different territories of the country.



Positions on religious freedom were recurrent, not only freedom of worship but also freedom of the media and freedom of propaganda, especially the search for spaces in the mass media and schools, circles, hospitals, etc. to expose his fundamentalist doctrine. This element is constant in the positions of the largest evangelical churches and is the reason for attacks on the Council of Churches of Cuba for not demanding it from the government. This always makes invisible the progress that has been achieved in this regard with different religious expressions that have had access to different means (although this can also serve to make those who have not enjoyed it demand it with greater reason).

The other issue of the pandemic has been the chaos and discredit of the Cuban State, whether openly or hidden, with a good part of the evangelical churches establishing themselves as the only way out and solution to the problem of joining the group and accepting the doctrine. Using phrases like "The apocalypse is coming and no other proposal solves it" with clear millenarian content.

Although all the Protestant and evangelical churches in the country made public calls to abide by the confinement measures, a certain air of obligation continued to be observed in the statements of some and the solutions taken by the evangelical churches were, many of them, in violation of the measures. governmental. For example, the Assembly of God called its pastors to visit their parishioners and the Methodists, in their services seen through their Facebook profiles, did not take sufficient measures in the services, which were limited during the time of confinement.

Demonizing messages against various religious expressions have been observed on social networks, comments that demonstrate ignorance and or feelings of hatred without taking into consideration, the differences between them, which show disrespect for the plurality of opinions and denial of the multi-religiosity and pluri-religiosity that are characteristics of the Cuban religious panorama, messages that threaten religious freedom. These actions of demonization and cancellation of the other have been a daily practice on social networks and are an example of fundamentalist attitudes. A reliable example is the publications of Pastor Adrián Pose on the occasion of the death of three religious' leaders of the Osha-Ifa Complex. Where it states that:

"We made decrees against the principality of witchcraft in Cuba, At the beginning of the national prayer vigil in a Facebook audio on March 5, 2021 (...) everyone died or was affected as God's judgment by decree of the Church for the advancement of the

Kingdom and not as personal revenge. We leave the rosy gospel, the one-sided gospel. Let's look at "both sides of the coin": God is love but also a CONSUMER FIRE."



These hate speeches seem to be gaining ground slowly but with an impressive and worrying force at the same time. These are other sad examples. Which make us confirm our interest in teaching some general content about the variety and complexity of our religious framework at some level of education to increase respect for diversity in all its facets.

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND THE FINANCIAL ECONOMIC REORGANIZATION OF THE COUNTRY

The economic impact of covid 19 and the economic reorganization on all religious expressions in general but on evangelical Christians in particular has been devastating, but in a special way it has hit those that are part of the ecumenical movement centered around the Council of Churches of Cuba. Many of them and consequently their projects, by reducing the financing of foreign movements, NGOs or churches, and seeing the value of financial contributions diminished in the face of the rampant inflation of the national currency, were left with the need to limit their assistance efforts. financially and materially to their fellow Cubans and therefore the

diakonia programs. (Programs to care for the elderly, assistance to the sick and at-risk families, care to homeless people, HIV-AIDS patients, sustainable agricultural development programs, etc.)

Even so, they maintain aid programs but very limited. To a lesser extent, churches that have developed national financing schemes and those that have adopted the prosperity theology scheme have been affected, also counting on monetary contributions from other institutions with the intention of ideological, political and theological pressure.

We believe that in general the financing trend will be directed towards obtaining more national currency and alternative exchange schemes to foreign currencies that are widespread in Cuban society (MLC exchange for CUP at the street exchange rate) and the entry of currency through unofficial.

The monetary contributions that appear in some churches are encouraged by discourses of healing and repentance in anticipation of a future apocalypse that defines the end of times and the arrival of the Messiah; leaders encourage the increase in monetary contributions as a means of salvation. Churches that coincide with the most fundamentalist sector, grouped around the Alliance of Cuban Evangelical Churches and in the neo-Pentecostal groups that favor the criterion of financial power as an expression of divine blessings.

CONCLUSIONS

The media implementation of evangelical work provides effectiveness and expansion of scope to consolidate transnational megachurches that, thanks to the instrumentation of mass culture and the production of evangelical spectacle, allows renewing audiences by adapting messages and aesthetics to the youth market.

This avalanche of messages on the networks will serve to make visible and legitimize

fundamentalist discourses in the Cuban public and will impose a matrix of opinion in favor of their anti-rights positions of these churches as a counterpart to government messages and pro-rights groups.

Although the three fundamental trends remain within the Protestant and evangelical churches, a growing polarization can be observed between a majority neoconservative or fundamentalist sector and pro-right liberal Christian groups. This polarization and the mutual accusations between the two poles can lead to confrontations that push the limits of the media and lead to situations of greater violence.

The demonization of the other, the irresponsible behavior and ignorance of the law and the secularism prevailing on the island are a constant of the neoconservative groups, in turn the victimization and the intentional manipulation of the biblical message are forms of masking the political intentions of some Cuban evangelical leaders.

All this in the midst of one of the worst global pandemics that led to the adaptation of the means of reproduction of religious expressions and an unprecedented rise in the so-called Cybergrace as a determining factor in the appearance of new structures and characteristics in many religions. and evangelical churches.

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