

## **Sexual anarchy or civilized *eros*? New sexual parameters, family and monogamy among evangelical gay men**

### **Anarquia sexual ou *eros* civilizado? Novos parâmetros sexuais, família e monogamia entre homens gays evangélicos**

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#### **Abstract**

The fatalistic discourse that we are moving towards a world without rules, whose most primitive instincts are reshaping life in contemporary societies, is strongly present, among conservative segments, in the social fabric. Such a narrative is constantly exploited by fundamentalist religious sectors, especially when they use the moral panic around issues related to the field of dissident sexualities from the heterosexual norm. Evidence has pointed to the reverse. In the field of sexual morality, especially related to sexual minorities, the phenomenon of inclusive churches indicates clear evidence of the reconfiguration of a sexual ethic, adapted to the reality of the LGBTI+ population. The article aims to discuss, based on investigations carried out through field research, during some years in inclusive churches in the city of Maceió (AL), the reconfiguration of the notion of “sin of homosexuality”, arising from the hegemonic Christian discourse, as well as the importance given to the notions of monogamous marriage, fidelity, codes of holiness and purity as guides for the action of LGBTI+ evangelicals in the spaces of the temple and society as a whole. It is possible to point out, in agreement with Gilles Lipovetsky, that the growth of individual autonomy did not lead to the decay of collective life. Nor has cultural liberalism fostered a sexuality without rules.

**Keywords:** Homosexuality. Christianity. Moralities. Inclusive Churches

#### **Resumo**

O discurso fatalista de que estaríamos caminhando para um mundo sem regras, cujos instintos mais primitivos estariam remodelando a vida nas sociedades contemporâneas é fortemente presente, entre segmentos conservadores, no tecido social. Tal narrativa é constantemente explorada por setores religiosos fundamentalistas, sobretudo quando utilizam-se do pânico moral em torno das questões

atinentes ao campo das sexualidades dissidentes da norma heterossexual. As evidências têm apontado o inverso. No campo da moral sexual, sobretudo relacionado às minorias sexuais, o fenômeno das igrejas inclusivas indica uma clara evidência da reconfiguração de uma ética sexual, adaptada à realidade da população LGBTI+. O artigo tem por objetivo discutir, a partir de investigações realizadas através de pesquisas de campo, durante alguns anos em igrejas inclusivas da cidade de Maceió (AL), a reconfiguração da noção de “pecado da homossexualidade”, oriunda do discurso cristão hegemônico, assim como a importância destinada às noções de casamento monogâmico, fidelidade, códigos de santidade e pureza enquanto guias para a ação de LGBTI+ evangélicos nos espaços do templo e da sociedade como um todo. É possível apontar, em concordância com Gilles Lipovetsky, que o crescimento da autonomia individual não levou à decadência da vida coletiva. Tampouco o liberalismo cultural impulsionou uma sexualidade sem regras.

**Palavras-chave:** Homossexualidade. Cristianismo. Moralidades. Igrejas Inclusivas.

## Introduction

The fatalistic discourse that we are moving towards a world without rules, whose most primitive instincts are reshaping life in contemporary societies, is strongly present among conservative groups, in the social fabric, especially in a context of the rise and organization of neoconservatism in the last decade. Moral panic, which consists of the instrumentalization of fear about topics considered taboo within society, has been politically exploited by fundamentalist religious sectors and ultraconservative politicians in Brazil and in the world, especially around issues related to the field of dissident sexualities of the heterosexual norm.

The evidence, however, has revealed a different picture of the narrative of moral degradation. Regarding issues related to sexual practice, it is possible to affirm that the sexual revolution, whose peak occurred around the 1960s, did not generate a scenario of anomie in the field of intimacy. In the sphere of sexual morality, especially related to sexual “minorities”,

associations for the cause LGBTI+<sup>1</sup> for some decades, they have been seeking equal rights regarding civil unions, the possibility of adoption, and even religious citizenship, the specific case of churches and inclusive Christian groups, which emerged in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States and between the 1990s and 2000s in Brazil.

The writing of this article, at first, involves a discussion about the processes of construction and transformation of intimacy in contemporary times. It is briefly presented, in a dialogue in the light of the authors Anthony Giddens (1991; 1993), Stuart Hall (2015), Zygmunt Bauman (2007), Manuel Castells (2003), José Maurício Domingues (1999) and Gilles Lipovetsky (2004; 2005), the historical processes of construction of new forms of fluid, uprooted subjectivities, and the ideological panorama of neo-individualism prevailing in current Western societies. The objective of this first part, of a theoretical nature, is to situate the reader on the sociological aspects that reveal the socially constructed character of identities that are also constituted, in the contemporary world, from sexual practices.

In a second moment, a brief contextualization of the emergence of inclusive churches and Christian groups in the USA and their arrival in Brazil is carried out, bringing some fragments of field research, from my master's thesis and doctoral thesis, carried out in inclusive churches in different periods, in the city of Maceió. Some excerpts from the interviews with young gay people, adherents and pastors of the denominations “Inclusive Missionary Church” (IMI) and “Pinheiro Baptist Church” (IBP), are brought to illustrate the discussion about the processes of reconfiguration of LGBTI+ identities around new moralities and the intersections between religious identity and non-hegemonic sexual identities<sup>2</sup>. The scope of this study is to

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<sup>1</sup>I use the acronym LGBTI+ (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites, Transsexuals, Transgenders and Intersex People) because I consider it more accessible, but I understand that there is a larger spectrum of people who do not fit into the heterosexual model, nor into the aforementioned nomenclature.

<sup>2</sup>The interviews, with a semi-structured model, were carried out in depth, both for the production of the dissertation and the thesis, based on the Life History method, in two religious communities located in the city of Maceió. In addition, through participant observation, it was possible to apprehend the behavior of the adherents and religious at the

demonstrate, through empirical approaches, the relations between agency and structure, based on the assumption that the microsociological study, despite having some limitations, does not lose sight of the relationship between the microcosm and the macrosociological context.

Therefore, the objective is to construct a reflection on the intersections of Christian moralities and non-hegemonic sexualities in the inclusive religious context, exploring these narratives developed by the interlocutors to launch the debate that the transformations in the field of intimacy did not fabricate a scenario of absence of moralities or instituted a libidinal anarchy, but are inserted in a context of pluralism and effervescence of new ethical standards marked by the prevalence of the new individualism, of values centred on human rights under the auspices of liberal democracies.

## **1 Neo-individualism and the new sexual identities**

In the words of Gilberto Velho (1996), the city is the space par excellence of modernity, especially due to the multifaceted and complex character of urban sociability, which emerges from a scenario of important social transformations. In modernity, social actors begin to construct their identities no longer from fixed locations, plastered elements, nor around members of an extended and nucleated family, common in pre-modern societies. The great migratory flows of workers towards the city, the process of urban growth provided by the expansion of industries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the encounter and constant interaction between people, coming from different places, in new networks of sociabilities, are some of the factors that help us to understand the advent of the modern subject (Velho, 1996; Domingues, 1999).

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times of the religious ceremonies, collecting and recording, by means of a field diary, some speeches given by the pastors during the celebrations. The names of the interlocutors were changed, with the exception of the names of the pastors of the Pinheiro Baptist Church, who preferred that they be disclosed because they considered themselves public figures. Within these churches, the presence of lesbian or transsexual women was not common, and there was only one young lesbian in the Inclusive Missionary Church, but who left the community for health reasons and did not accept the collaboration with the research. The interview material was collected between 2013, 2017 and 2018.

In other words, identity, especially in contemporary times, is permeated by new mechanisms marked by greater fluidity, flexibility and reflexivity regarding the subjects' self-perception and interaction with other individuals (Giddens, 1993; 1991; Hall, 2015). As Bauman (2007) warns, the contemporary individual is crossed by consumption driven by capitalism. Thus, it is possible to affirm that, in a context marked by the capitalist lexicon, consumption also becomes an important element defining identities, consequently demarcating borders.

Therefore, the advent of the internet, decades later, the creation of social networks and the popularization of smartphones would be further accelerating the inevitable corrosion of the old and traditional structures that worked, as systems of values and beliefs, as true compasses, opening space for the emergence of the contemporary subject, focused on their individuality and autonomy.

Castells (2003) highlights that individualism, understood as a system of values and beliefs that informs behavior focusing on the individual, constitutes a dominant trend in today's social relations. The behavioral pattern that the author calls "networked individualism" does not emerge as a consequence of the creation of the internet. This merely provided the material conditions for such development, as did the development of the mobile telephone, which helped to produce a personalized interconnection for different social situations, unequivocally revealing a kind of triumph of the individual.

This same individual, uprooted, self-centered and, at the same time, malleable to the issues around him, only became individualized based on a panorama of socialization that legitimizes and naturalizes certain cognitive and moral standards at the heart of a given culture (DOMINGUES, 1999). With the emergence of new social movements in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a plurality of markers, such as social class, ethnicity, religion and sexuality, therefore, began to give meaning to the life of this decentered subject. In other words, identities lose their former fixity, just like institutions and social rules.

The current world, according to Lipovetsky (2005), becomes plural. There is not just a single institution as the source of the production of values and beliefs. Along with the process of secularization and expansion of democratic regimes around the world, especially in the context of the West, we can see the consolidation of a polytheism of values. In other words, the logic of the era of modern democracies presupposes a relativization of truth, which loses its absolute character as values such as freedom of expression, legal equality, tolerance to differences are consolidated in a scenario of maturity and expansion legal status of individual rights. At the heart of an increasingly complex, diverse and plural world, maintaining a structure based on single thinking would be inconceivable and even unimaginable.

This is not to say that traditional institutions, such as religious institutions, have ceased to exist or exercise power, but that they have become, broadly speaking, optional within the broader menu of the religious market. The Catholic Church, for its part, within a broader economy of symbolic exchanges, continues to position itself as the spokesperson of truth, but at the same time it has had to adapt to a series of typical elements of the contemporary world, invariably acquiring an ambiguous and less rigid character<sup>3</sup> than in the past. The very diversity in the Christian world impelled the Church, through the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), to recognize “salvific” elements within Protestant denominations, breaking with the view arising from the Council of Trent (1545-1563), that there would be no salvation outside Catholicism.

## **1.1 Sexuality and identity**

According to Giddens (1993), the individual's self-understanding based on their sexuality is a recent phenomenon in human history. Appearing

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<sup>3</sup>The Catholic theologian Marciano Vidal (2008; 2010) elucidates, through documentary research, how the Church has been formally reshaping its view of homosexuality and LGBTI+ people, gradually replacing the notion of a God who makes no distinction between sin and sinner, treating them as sides of the same coin, with the vision of a divinity that rejects “sin”, but he has compassion and welcomes the “sinner”. Welcoming would also be the role of pastoral care.

exclusively in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, through the technical language of Biology and Zoology, the term “sexuality” only approached the meaning as we currently understand it at the end of that century. At first, the word was used to gain control over female sexual activity. It was considered immoral for women to express their desire for sexual pleasure, while men naturally had a more carnal sexual aspect.

This view contrasts with pre-Enlightenment conceptions, which since Antiquity conceived of women as beings full of sensuality, and men, more focused on what was friendly. The pre-Enlightenment conception was anchored in a worldview centered on the vertical hierarchy of a single sex: The male. On the other hand, the contemporary hegemonic vision is based on binarism and radical opposition, based on the centrality of sexual dimorphism (Laqueur, 2001; Butler, 2010).

That said, sexuality, thinking with Foucault, is a historical device, that is, a set of discourses and social practices, situated in time, that defines and redefines a social problem (Foucault, 2011; Miskolci, 2012). It is not merely an agglomeration of biological stimuli, a given of nature, therefore, prior to culture and which automatically imposes itself on bodies (Butler, 2010; Giddens, 1993). Sexuality, like sexual bodies, must be understood as a social elaboration, that is, it is systematically crossed by norms, conflicts, hierarchies, among other power relations (Foucault, 2011; Giddens, 1993; Laqueur, 2001).

In the contemporary imagination, sexuality becomes something that the individual possesses, inseparable from the body and defining who one is. Something intended for the private sphere, for self-identity, but also presents itself in its public facet, especially when thinking about the social organization of movements, whose causes of sexual rights and sexual freedom are increasingly gaining ground in democratic societies. The political activity of the so-called sexual minorities, which encompass the feminist and LGBTI+ movements, played, and still plays, an important role in the transformations in the field of intimacy in recent decades (Giddens, 1993).

With the arrival of modern methods of contraception, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the process of distancing sexuality from procreation accelerated, freeing, above all, women from the fear of constant pregnancies and even death during childbirth, a common occurrence in such a period (Giddens, 1993). Such questions are at the origin of what Giddens calls plastic sexuality. The technological advances that allowed the creation of modern contraceptive methods, consequently the already highlighted female sexual autonomy, combined with the flourishing of female and male homosexuality, have a direct relationship with the struggles waged by the new social movements of the 1960s. In this sense, the aspect open and malleable self-identity and the reflective character of the body are the main characteristics of a highly reflexive society. Such highlighted factors, therefore, reconfigure intimate relationships at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Faced with this panorama of profound social transformations and their reverberations in intimacy, conservative forces announced the installation of a moral anomie that would, inevitably, corrode the social fabric. However, the process of sexual revolution did not lead contemporary societies to a kind of libidinal anarchy, nor did we move towards a state of “moral anarchy”, as conservative sectors boast through the practice of moral panic. The development of individual autonomy, which requires greater freedom and tolerance to make choices, did not drive the decline of the collective (Lipovetsky, 2004; 2005).

The neo-individualism of today's times is anchored in the notion of self-possession and control, of bodily sovereignty. The ideas of freedom of expression and sexual freedom express the apogee not only of a hedonistic and egocentric world, but, above all, of a universe centered on values of liberal democracy, which allow each individual to freely express their desires, without persecution of political order (Lipovetsky, 2004). It is a time, thinking with Lipovetsky (2004), marked by subjective mobility, in which social actors have autonomy to construct their personal environments.

There is, in turn, in more conservative sectors, the diffuse feeling that there has been a meltdown of morality, especially with the loss of influence of

institutions such as the Church. However, what has been occurring is the transformation and reconfiguration of morality itself. We no longer live under the aegis of a sacrificial morality centered on traditional values (Lipovetsky, 2005). There is, empirically speaking, no scenario of decline in religious and family values, but the pluralization and diversification of these institutions, generating new formats of solidarity between social actors. Even in secular societies, religion continues to play a social role and is far from ceasing to exist, as some adherents of the hardest axis of secularization theory believe (Berger, 2000; 2007). While there are regions on the planet whose population's religious activity is not as significant or, at least, is quite restricted to the private sphere, as is the case in several urban regions in Europe, in other places, such as Latin America itself, and more Specifically in Brazil, neo-pentecostalism has been remodeling the religious scenario since the nineties, previously marked by Catholic hegemony, acting strongly in the political scenario<sup>4</sup>.

## **2 New Sources of Religious Meaning: The Advent of Churches and Inclusive Christian Groups**

As highlighted during the exposition of the first part of the text, modernity engenders the rupture of univocal and absolute formulas for interpreting reality. With the advancement of liberal democracies, a plural vision of the world was consolidated, enabling the existence of multiple institutions, as well as diverse ideologies, which guide the individual's action based on their free choices. However, it is possible to say that this scenario, marked by relativism, also produced ambiguities. Traditional religions, consequently, resurfaced with discourses of unity and cohesion, bringing the psychological effect of comfort in the face of an increasingly fast-paced and uncertain world (Crespi, 1999). Berger (1994) states that in times when relativism prevails, the absolute vision can generate a new fascination,

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<sup>4</sup>For more considerations on neo-pentecostalism, see Ricardo Mariano (1999).

highlighting the very contradiction and non-homogeneity that characterize the modern social fabric.

In pluralistic times, especially in the contemporary context, more radicalized views that advocated the abolition of certain institutions, designed by dichotomous discourses about moral values, tended to gradually dissipate. Monogamy, for example, is no longer the target of political narratives that aim to destroy and overcome it. The complexity of what several authors call postmodernity lies in the fact that truth is no longer constructed from sophisticated philosophical schemes, but through subjective experiences. Adherence to monogamy, or a non-monogamous relationship, becomes a criterion for personal choice, of what best suits the individual, as both become legitimate models. Even relationships that deviate from the monogamous standard are subject to mutual agreements, not meaning anything goes or libidinal anarchy (Lipovetsky, 2005).

To a large extent, religious belief begins to operate within the logic of neo-individualism, in the context of truth that is dispersed in the face of the particular experiences of specific individuals and groups. The springs that drive free religious choice do not only concern the convinced adherence to a conglomerate of dogmas and truths of faith, but especially the sensations of physical and mental well-being that such ideologies can provide to the adherent. In other words, the *à la carte* model of religion crystallizes (Domingues, 1999; Lipovetsky, 2004; 2005). In the Brazilian case, in economically fragile contexts, where the State's actions are negligent or ineffective, religious adherence occurs mainly due to this gap. Neo-pentecostal churches begin to act as emotional and even material support for believers from, above all, the popular classes. Not by chance, it is in these social classes that the evangelical movement has had the greatest support.

In the cauldron of multiple religious possibilities are the Churches and inclusive Christian groups. Such segments, which fight for the inclusion of LGBTI+ people in the universe of Christianity, emerged with greater visibility and organization in the last decades of the twentieth century (Musskopf, 2022; Nativity, 2008; 2013), a period marked by the second wave

of the feminist movement and the Stonewall rebellion (1969) in the United States, a milestone in the organization of the modern homosexual movement<sup>5</sup>. Such associations combine political and religious elements into their narratives, as the perception that gays, bisexuals, lesbians and transsexuals are also “sons” and “daughters of God” was not separated from the political struggle for rights. The emergence of inclusive Christian movements, therefore, provided tension to the political forces of the time, including the status quo of religion, against the heterosexist monopoly of religious power (Musskopf, 2022; Natividade, 2013).

According to Musskopf (2022), the formation of (a) Gay Theology(ies) is invariably linked to the organization of the political movement and the field of Gay and Lesbian Studies, developed within the academic space. Divine revelation, from the perspective of the aforementioned theology, is closely linked to bodily experience. The “son of God” became flesh, that is, he assumed his identity from the materiality of the body. The LGBTI+ identity itself is anchored in bodily materiality (Musskopf, 2015). It is through their bodies that LGBTI+ people express the truth of who they are. In this sense, such bodies gain relevance and sacredness.

It is necessary to highlight the diverse character of churches and inclusive groups, both from the point of view of organization, religious tradition (with the majority of groups belonging to the Protestant universe with its subdivisions) and theological. Natividade (2008; 2013) highlights two major trends within this scenario. Some churches and groups dialogue and build mediations with the Pentecostal field; in the second trend, there is a permanent dialogue with LGBTI+ social movements.

Musskopf (2022) points out that such churches and groups, whose behavior regarding political involvement in the struggle for rights is more linked to the 40s and 70s of the last century, when located in the USA; and the 80s and 90s, when they were located in Latin America, within the context

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<sup>5</sup>I used the term “homosexual movement” in a generalist sense to illustrate, as did Regina Facchini (2005), the historical aspect of its emergence, without denying the existing disputes, the plurality and diversity of acronyms used throughout this trajectory to represent it.

in which there was no minimum recognition of citizenship of LGBTI+ people. Between the years 2000 and the present day, there is a strong predominance, due to several factors, of churches and groups with a less politically engaged character and closer to evangelical and Pentecostal experiences<sup>6</sup>.

In this article, I do not intend to scrutinize details of the construction and diversification of these denominations over the last few decades, but to highlight, more broadly, that these religious segments are reflections of a mosaic of factors linked to various contemporary issues. Among these issues are the processes of transformation of intimacy. These same transformations, driven by the sexual revolution, did not generate, in the long term, radical ruptures in the ethical field. What can be noticed is the expansion of intersubjective possibilities, each one loaded with norms and rules that establish mutual limits, especially greater equality between the subjects involved in these affective webs.

Religion continues, unquestionably, to exercise power and prestige. In some regions, more intensely, in others, less. The Brazilian case is emblematic because, despite being a secular state, an Enlightenment and secularized tradition of opposition to religion was not established, even among more literate segments of society. This also reflects, thinking with Velho (1996), the permanent tension between hierarchical and individualistic values arranged in the particularity of Brazil's constitution. Religion is, in this sense, ingrained in national identity, playing an important role in the construction of identities (Burity, 2014; Camurça, 2003; Giumbelli, 1996), since the process of formation of the country, especially through the actions of Catholicism, which in recent decades has been losing space to Pentecostal Christian religions.

In a broader sense, inclusive churches and Christian groups reconstruct LGBTI+ identities under the evangelical motto that God is no respecter of persons, replacing conceptions linked to sin, originating from the hegemonic

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<sup>6</sup>The IBP can be read, mainly from the performance of pastors, as an exception within this trend of less political engagement, despite the reproduction of a conservative Christian view, on several issues, by the majority of its gay adherents.

tradition of Christianity, as a way to include and guarantee the religious citizenship of LGBTI+ social actors. In inclusive Pentecostalized segments, they are common<sup>7</sup> gender normativities that “sanctify” LGBTI+ identities, i.e., codes of holiness are elaborated by the ecclesiastical body and internalized by the faithful through worship and/or other religious gatherings (Natividade, 2008; 2010; 2017; Coelho Júnior, 2014). Such codes are based on sanitized standards of sexual conduct and bodily performance in the hegemonic model of masculinity, which is based on the idea of “not looking good” (“*não dar pinta*”), a jargon commonly used by sexually minority groups to characterize “discreet” behavior (Natividade, 2017).

### **3 Sexual anarchy or civilized *eros*? Some field data**

In my incursion into the field of inclusive churches, starting in 2014, which culminated in contact with denominations and the study of two churches, I was able to identify, among portions of gay adherents and some leaders, the naturalization of heteronormative models of sexual and affective practice reconfigured to welcome LGBTI+ people. This yearning to adapt these patterns varied in intensity depending on the church investigated, being more recurrent in the IMI context, which maintained a more fruitful dialogue with the hegemonic Pentecostal universe; and less recurrent in the IBP, whose dialogues with historical segments of Protestantism and social movements were more vigorous.

#### **3.1 Reconfigurations of the notions of family and monogamy**

Entering the universe of the Inclusive Missionary Church (IMI), through the speeches of assistant pastor Tom, it is highlighted that monogamy was designed by God precisely to protect his “children” from the contamination of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The prohibition of a

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<sup>7</sup>For Natividade, even if more sanitized patterns are common within these communities, it does not mean that gender fissures do not exist in the same space.

sexual life outside of a relationship between two people, according to Tom, does not come from an arbitrary characteristic of God, but is the result of his love and appreciation for the health and hygiene of “his people”.

On the topic of sexual practices with more than one partner, the pastor states that one of IMI's missions is to treat LGBTI+ people in order to show that sex with different partners does not lead to happiness, as it only aims to fill a gap, which should be occupied by God:

This is one of the visions of the inclusive church: Treating gays, showing them that we can be happy without practicing promiscuity. We do not depend on promiscuity to be happy. Promiscuity will never complete us completely (...).

Another objective of the church was to show society that gay Christians are not “sexually promiscuous”. The adoption of a set of moral rules would be the first step towards building this “new man”. Tom also highlights that virginity is the ideal condition for marriage, however, God does not view sexual activity as a sin when carried out within an exclusive relationship. The sin would be in the sexual act, which puts the individual's own health at risk. In this case, once again, reference is made to IST and partner rotation.

It is noted in this speech that there is a relativization of sex practiced before marriage, clearly understood as a sin by other Christian views. If sexual activity occurs within a monogamous relationship, it would not be a sinful practice, in the pastor's view. This relativization reflects the very condition of the modern individual, disembedded (Giddens, 1991), immersed in a plurality of worlds, migrating between various structures of rival and antagonistic plausibilities, absorbing, reconfiguring and adapting different ideologies arranged in society (Berger, 2018). On the one hand, the conservative worldview of sex linked only to procreation; on the other, the liberalization of sex as a consequence of continuous processes of debiologization. Although the heteronormative basis of the monogamous perspective is maintained, it is possible to observe a subtle detachment from a vision focused on biological determinism. In the case pointed out by the assistant pastor, sex also represents the search for enjoyment as a couple and

not in a “selfish” way, as occurs in the practice of masturbation, seen as a sin by IMI leaders. Cognitive schemes, however, are modeled based on the pure-impure binomial.

The pulpit speeches, in turn, constantly address the notion of family. On the IMI Facebook page, there was the following description of the church’s *ethos*:

To be a family church, within an inclusive expectation, with the purpose of reconciling lives through the liberating gospel of Christ revealed on the cross. Reach out to everyone regardless of their sexuality, ethnicity or social status, fulfilling the Go that we find in the book of Marcos (...).

The notion of family developed by IMI is anchored in the idea of welcoming without discrimination. The church developed a diverse program in addition to the services, such as joint outings on the city's waterfront, meetings at the main pastor's house for recreational activities, etc., with the aim of offering a socialization network that could provide support and affection to its followers, mostly young people between 17 and 25 years old. In some cases, once seen as a space of oppression and discrimination, the idea of an inclusive family built by the church allowed the re-elaboration of subjectivity, self-forgiveness and a positive reading of non-heterosexual sexualities. For Axel Honneth (2003), intersubjective recognition processes provide social actors with the possibility of building a good life, based on self-respect and healthy self-esteem.

### **3.2 Holy and sanitized homosexuality**

IMI, in its brief history in the city of Maceió, was marked by some internal changes. Originally set up as a branch of the New Hope Christian Community (CCNE), located in the state of Rio Grande do Norte (RN), the community constantly had to fulfill its ceremonies within a strict code of good Christian conduct. The young principal pastor, Benjamin, at the age of twenty-five, had to remove the reamer on one of his ears at each service and put on a suit and tie. After a few years, there was a rupture with the CCNE

and one of the causes was the demand for compliance with strict standards of behavior<sup>8</sup>.

However, after a few months as an independent Church, the IMT began to assume again a more conservative model of conduct and even of theological vision. The sermons began to emphasize, with greater emphasis, the importance of a hygiene of conducts, of a monogamous sex life, of distancing oneself from the “things of the world”, such as going to nightclubs and parties. The speech of the senior pastor, during a sermon<sup>9</sup>, elucidates well the return to the discourse of sanctification and sanitization of “homosexuality”:

Maybe as a child, when they noticed your mannerisms, they cursed you; We, the Lord's colorful sheep, were expelled from our churches, thrown into the streets... you perhaps persist: “Lord, I need to be freed”. And, 92 years ago, men rose up and founded the first inclusive church in the world. [...] The Lord took us out of nightclubs, out of dark places... he fulfilled Isaiah's promise that my house will be a house of prayer for everyone!

Now, homosexuals in Maceió are prepared to love. God gave us IMI and we, who were left by others and considered as nothing, began to be seen as people... you are the bride of Christ, queen of the Lord, beautiful! The beauty of inclusive ministry in Brazil has spread... IMI has spread. The Lord has brought us back into His presence! Sometimes we reject God because of things outside... we have tried to bring the “things of the world” into the house of God... we forget that one day we were a people who were condemned to hell, but the Lord had mercy on us and opened the doors of Brazil (in the midst of the pastor's fiery speech, someone shouts: Hallelujah!).

The Holy Spirit exhorts us, he took us from nothing and gave us a place. He brought us into his presence and included us, grafted us into Christ Jesus for the plan of salvation. How long will we despise the Lord? Trading God for anything! Wasn't all the rejection he felt enough? Why are you far from me? God is jealous of you who have exchanged God for anything. If you have done other things that make God angry, if you have been ungrateful to the Lord, listen to Isaiah, chapter 01, verse 12. Why come Thursday, Saturday... Sunday? Stop bringing useless offers! These people honor Me with their lips and not with their hearts... you come to worship Me from the mouth out! (At this point, Benjamin speaks as if he were the deity himself warning the faithful). Clean yourselves, wash yourselves, stop doing evil... fight for the rights of the excluded! Our churches have lost focus, but IMI wants to be a living Church! By the grace of the Lord we are included through Christ Jesus. Don't trade Him for anything!

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<sup>8</sup>Another cause was the lack of financial autonomy. Part of the tithe proceeds needed to be sent to the CCNE in Natal, Rio Grande do Norte. IMI faced a financial dilemma, as its membership was mostly made up of young people who were financially dependent on their parents and/or other family members.

<sup>9</sup>Speech collected and recorded in the field diary during the celebration of the service.

The pure-impure scheme guides the pastor's vision, highlighting that before inclusive churches existed, LGBTI+ individuals sought morally unhealthy spaces, highlighted above all with the term “dark”. With the arrival of such churches, there would no longer be reasons for any type of sexual and emotional life outside of a Christian code of holiness. The excerpt in which Benjamin highlights that the action of the Holy Spirit removed them from “nothing”, giving them a home, focuses on the perception that the construction of a structure of intersubjective recognition, in this case the church itself, allowed the development of self-esteem and self-respect of supporters.

However, the recognition provided by the church requires submission to codes of holiness and, consequently, the purification of conduct, as the “promiscuous homosexual” is frowned upon by society. As Natividade (2017) explains, these gender norms focus on an attempt to consolidate a public image in order to remove the stigma of homophobia. In other words, certain inclusive segments, as a way of seeking recognition from society, lead LGBTI+ identities to the pole of “sanctity”, that is, of normalization, as opposed to the pole of sin or debauchery, present in the imagination. Social.

Furthermore, around the 1980s, especially with the HIV/AIDS boom, the LGBTI+ population was once again stigmatized under the label of sexually dissolute (Facchini, 2005; Trevisan, 2004). However, homoerotic relationships were also crossed by a series of norms and ideas such as the repulsion against betrayal, the maintenance of monogamy, the dream of conventional marriage, the adoption of children, etc. The emergence and growth of inclusive Christian churches and groups reflect processes of struggles for recognition crossed by hegemonic values, especially when we analyze experiences of inclusive churches with a strong neo-pentecostal tendency.

This broader societal imaginary about monogamy, marriage and building a family has repercussions on the microcosm of IMI and IBP, each in its own way. One of the most recurring questions, in the context of the

Pinheiro Church, raised with pastors, concerns the possibility of religious marriage between people of the same sex. In one of his reports, Mateus, 28 years old, TV producer, spoke of some doubts that had arisen between him and his ex-partner, when they were dating, regarding the baptism of LGBTI+ people:

He (referring to his ex-partner) went to the pastor to have a conversation... which he already wanted, right?... he was going to talk anyway. But what motivated him to talk, to look immediately, was our relationship. Because he wanted to know... he wanted to have a conversation with the pastor to find out what it was like for two gay men to date while being members of the Church. And the pastor's position... he said it's like any other couple, period! Like any other couple, what if... and my ex (ex-partner) even asked "ah, but if I wanted to marry Mateus, what would it be like?" He responded that we have the same rights as any member. Then, he (his ex-partner) asked if he would marry us. Then, the pastor said that he only marries friends, that he only marries family and friends. That it is his personal decision as a pastor, that he only marries friends... family and friends. He doesn't perform marriages for just anyone, no. He only gets close to people. Be straight, be gay.

In line with the imaginary of monogamous marriage, many members think of the recurring exchange of partners as something reprehensible. Assuming an inclusive Christian ethos, in the case of gay members of the IBP, involves internalizing Christian principles based on the idea of family and monogamous fidelity. Tiago, 26 years old, telemarketing operator, describes that, during the period in which he distanced himself from an evangelical community because he felt discriminated against and not welcomed because he was gay and effeminate, he began to resort to "sex without commitment" as a way of containing the existential void:

I needed to occupy my mind somehow, so I made an appointment. But, like, I started to realize that that didn't satisfy me either. Because, like, I had sex, then I ejaculated and the person was there, and I was like: "it's over, it's over, it's over!" And, like, it ended and the person wanted to stay, but I was like: "Oh my God, what have I done! I want to leave, I want to leave, I can't show it. I want so-and-so to leave and so-and-so won't go. It seems like the more I want him to leave, the more he wants to stay". And it was like that, I felt very disposable. It was a very disposable relationship.

The "uncommitted sex" presented by James symbolizes the trivialization of the body, promiscuity and, consequently, the absence of God.

When he returned to the church, he no longer saw the need to look for multiple partners. Being a Christian, in his view, also means being able to maintain self-control over sexual practices, seeking to build “something more solid” through dating. Although I did not witness a speech from the pulpit by the IBP pastors<sup>10</sup>, when it comes to hegemonic Christianity, there is a crystallized charge around the worldview of fidelity, monogamy, child-rearing and family, brought by many adherents when they attended other Christian denominations.

As all interlocutors interviewed came from conventional Christian denominations, evangelical or Catholic, it is common to bring with them to a greater or lesser extent the understanding of a “healthy sexuality”, now no longer focused only on heterosexuality, but reconfigured to include LGBTI+ people. What is happening is the construction of a new vision, in this case positive, about sexual and gender identities that deviate from the norm, but that also absorb elements from hegemonic religious institutions.

These conceptions are crossed by social conflicts, disputes between more fundamentalist sectors of society, which insist on the representation of LGBTI+ identities based on demonization and sin, and groups that believe that within religious institutions, such as Christianity, it is possible to build an inclusive ethos as a strategy for social recognition, making us think about how within the inclusive Christian universe religion operates, directly or indirectly, in disciplining sexual conduct (Natividade, 2008; 2013).

Unlike what some neoconservative narratives propagate, in the sense of denouncing an escalation of destruction of morality or the end of limits in terms of sexual behavior, the evidence has shown other contours and a plurality of perceptions regarding the expressions of desire, not being able to be generalized. rudimentary. In any case, a significant part of the struggles for recognition of LGBTI+ movement movements, throughout the 1980s and

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<sup>10</sup>Involvement in constant contact with social movements and adherents of a theological perspective more centered on community aspects, the pastors of the IBP did not usually build their preaching from conservative elements about norms of individual behavior, standardization of customs regarding the body, etc.

2000s, followed a less radical trend (in the sense of a profound rupture with certain institutional pillars of society), and a more pragmatic one<sup>11</sup>.

In the Brazilian scenario, in ten years of the recognition of stable same-sex unions, the number of people of the same gender who got married grew on average four times more, compared to records in 2013, when registry offices across the country were authorized to make unions official. That year, there were 3,700 unions, while in 2022, the number jumped to 12,987<sup>12</sup>. Likewise, since 2015, the Federal Superior Court (STF) has revoked the adoption of children by LGBTI+ couples, making this decision valid for all courts in the country.

Movements for the cause of LGBTI+ people, between the mid-1980s and 2000, worked towards building a fruitful socio-state dialogue, within a period that Facchini (2020) calls “mobilization cycles related to the Constituent Assembly”; that is, in a historical moment marked by the end of the dictatorship and redemocratization, in which there were greater spaces for dialogue and socio-state participation, generating demands for the criminalization of homophobia, recognition of the Social Name for transgender, transsexual or transvestite people, conferences in municipal and state levels to debate the construction of public policies for the LGBTI+ segment, etc. The author (2005) also highlights the important pragmatic role that segments such as the Gay Group of Bahia (GGA) and the Triângulo Rosa had, between the 1980s and 1990s, differentiating themselves from their predecessor groups (whose dialogue with political sectors of the radical left was present), in this pragmatic mobilization of the fight for civil rights, inspiring other segments.

Due to several factors, such as the growing corruption scandals linked to the political management of the Workers' Party, growing disbelief in political activity, the strong role of religious actors, culminating in the

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<sup>11</sup>Facchini (2005; 2020) highlights the disputes between the autonomist and socialist strands and the more pragmatic trend directed at the rights of homosexuals in the 90s, a period of reorganization of the MHB, also a time of organization of the first “Pride Parades”.

<sup>12</sup>Available at: <<https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2023/05/casamentos-homoafetivos-crescem-quatro-vezes-em-10-anos-de-permissao-no-brasil-mulheres-lideram.ghtml>>. Accessed on: July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

election of Jair Bolsonaro, LGBTI+ activism took on other forms with less focus on demands institutionalized ways of doing politics and a greater centrality in more fluid political engagement formats (Facchini, 2020).

Not only the context of the crisis of democracy and the growing criminalization of politics drive transformations in current political activity on the part of LGBTI+ actors, but also other aspects, such as the growth in the use of digital media and the use of these new spaces by engaged political subjects in the construction of problematizations in the light of discussions based on post-structuralist theories, such as queer studies, the result of the expansion of university education in the country in recent decades (Facchini, 2020).

Thus, according to Facchini (2020), nowadays, the meanings for political action are directly linked to the processes of reworking oneself and social relations. There is a greater centrality in the body and experience of each subject, not as a way of forging equality, common to the homosexual movement of the 1970s (Facchini, 2005; Macrae, 1990), but in the sense of recognizing differences as elements that build subjectivities. In short, the concept of intersectionality, arising from discussions of the black feminist movement, gains adherence and becomes popular within this contemporary phase of action by increasingly plural subjects (Facchini, 2020).

It is possible to create a dialogue between the new senses of solidarity centered on the recognition of differences and bodily experience based on what Lipovetsky (2005) calls “responsible neo-individualism”, common to hypermodern societies. In other words, the structural element of neo-individualism did not generate a tendency towards social anomie, the weakening of notions of solidarity and a lack of ethical understanding of fighting for rules that are considered fair and balanced.

Current times bring with them a new ethics, no longer based on sacrifice and self-effacement, but based on autonomous choice. In this sense, there is a renewal of values, a new regulation of ethics itself and not the process of establishing moral anarchy (Lipovetsky, 2004; 2005). In fact, the ideas of a univocal, universal and natural morality were gradually replaced by versions that take into account the experiences of other social groups and

their particular ways of existence. If there is crisis and decadence, it certainly refers to the single model paradigm.

The neoconservative understanding that we live in times of sexual anarchy, for example, borders on a fable devoid of any solid evidence. The fight for civil union, adoption, among other flags of LGBTI+ movements throughout the Western world, also corresponds to new regulations in the field of sexuality and human behavior, pointing out how much cultural liberalism has generated, roughly speaking, a lot more moderate, conciliatory customs than profound, revolutionary ruptures or those devoid of notions of ethics (Lipovetsky, 2004).

### **Final considerations**

The field data presented in this article, as well as the presentation of considerations from other microsociological research, are not separated from the macrosociological aspects. In other words, it is common knowledge among social scientists that the problems of a community are related to the large-scale dilemmas of a country, to paraphrase Norbert Elias (2000). The specificities of the microcosm are not separated from the broader reality.

In this sense, the presentation of some excerpts, from both my master's thesis (2014) and my doctoral thesis (2019), also served to illustrate, and bring to debate, the central argument that the organization of social movements of struggle for the LGBTI+ cause, in the contemporary scenario of the last forty years, is moving towards the recognition and affirmation of the elementary values of liberal democracy. In these movements, like the functioning of churches and inclusive Christian groups in the country and abroad, there is no impetus to instrumentalize a radical rupture or, at the very least, to rebel against ethics and moral restraints, as neoconservative sectors shout. of society.

The maintenance of an ethics of relationships is present both in churches and in more Pentecostalized inclusive Christian groups, which reinforce heteronormative models aimed at sanctifying homosexuality

(Natividade, 2008; 2010; 2013) and in other inclusive religious groups, which build more narratives. close to social movements, and which resist through alternatives to the heteronormative world view (Weiss de Jesus, 2012).

The new moral grammars established in the contemporary world reflect the 'natural' process of the movement of moral transformation throughout history. The term natural with quotation marks is used here to illustrate something inevitable in the sense of the complexity itself, the transitory and dialectical character of human constructions. I therefore agree with the perspective of Honneth (2003) when he states that the struggle for recognition, waged by social movements, is the engine of transformations in the moral order of a society.

Conservative sectors, generally populated in large parts by religious groups, often of a fundamentalist nature, have difficulty recognizing the existence of other possible moralities beyond the hegemonic universe they share. The emergence of the legitimacy of new consensual agreements between new political subjects, who were previously completely on the margins of society or at the lowest poles of power, has generated a conservative counteroffensive, whose objective is to restore borders that place the unknown other on a level of denial. of humanity, something animalistic, therefore, outside of morality.

In dialogue with the reflections brought by Lipovetsky (2004; 2005), it was possible to point out that contemporary times, or hypermodernity, as the author highlights, inaugurated a new model of individualism that is not only associated with the search for narcissistic pleasure. There is an element of responsibility in neo-individualism that prevents social breakdown. Democratic individualist culture, therefore, presupposes the recognition of subjective rights, quality of life and individual fulfillment. These are not times when the restraints of customs are broken. These are times when moralities acquire other contours of a subjective order and spontaneous donation.

In the most intimate and subjective sphere, notions of respect for other people's space remain in vogue; sexual relations are based on consensuality,

increasingly consolidating the repulsion towards sexual violence, pedophilia, among other types of violence against “minority” and/or vulnerable sectors of society. Due to a series of elements, intimate relationships took on new contours, but ethics in interactions was not abandoned. People will certainly not stop getting married, but relationships will no longer need to be rigidly guided by the motto “until death do us part”. As long as it lasts, which could mean a few years or even decades, in most cases, loyalty continues to be a common value, but one that starts to operate based on the particular experiences of political subjects. Loving involvements that break the monogamy axis, as is the case with open relationships, are also based on a set of mutual agreements between the parties.

In the broadest aspect, individuals mobilize in a rush of solidarity in the face of tragedies and great human catastrophes; ethics committees spread across the world demanding transparency and honesty in the most varied social sectors (Lipovetsky, 2004). That said, we are not experiencing an ethical loosening in social relations. As Lipovetsky highlights, freedom serves as a brake on freedoms.

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