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DOSSIER

Ministries on WhatsApp: gender, sensorialities and ethical-political transformations in the everyday life of evangelical women

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Abstract: Recent literature on the political participation of Pentecostal evangelicals in Brazil has drawn attention to the transformations caused by their use of digital media. To broaden this debate, in this article I describe the everyday use of the WhatsApp instant messaging program by prayer groups, shedding light on how disputes engaged by Pentecostal women have re-signified their pastoral careers and formed new evangelical collectivities. With the emergence of other ways of experiencing the intimacy provided by mobile devices, I reflect on religious connections established across images and sounds in WhatsApp groups, in addition to the digital impact on the dynamics of female religious authority and its transnational expansion.

Keywords: Pentecostal evangelicals; WhatsApp; digital media; gender; religion.

Ministérios no WhatsApp: gênero, sensorialidades e transformações ético-políticas no cotidiano de mulheres evangélicas

Resumo: Diferentes análises sobre a participação política de evangélicas(os) pentecostais no Brasil nos últimos anos têm chamado a atenção para transformações causadas pelos usos de mídias digitais por estes grupos. Em busca de ampliar este debate a partir de elementos que compõem usos cotidianos de grupos de oração no WhatsApp, o objetivo deste artigo é compreender como as disputas engajadas por mulheres pentecostais têm ressignificado suas carreiras pastorais e formado novas coletividades evangélicas. Com a emergência de outros modos de viver as intimidades propiciadas por dispositivos móveis, reflito sobre relações religiosas estabelecidas através de imagens e sons em grupos de WhatsApp, além dos impactos digitais nas dinâmicas de autoridade religiosa feminina e sua expansão transnacional.

Palavras-chave: evangélicos pentecostais; WhatsApp; mídias digitais; gênero; religião.

Ministerios en WhatsApp: género, sensorialidades y transformaciones ético-políticas en el cotidiano de mujeres evangélicas

Resumen: Diferentes análisis sobre la participación política de los evangélicos pentecostales en Brasil en los últimos años han llamado la atención sobre las transformaciones provocadas por el uso de medios digitales por parte de estos grupos. Buscando ampliar este debate a partir de elementos que componen el uso cotidiano de los grupos de oración en WhatsApp, busqué comprender cómo las disputas libradas por las mujeres pentecostales han resignificado sus carreras pastorales y conformado nuevas colectividades evangélicas. Con el surgimiento de otras formas de experimentar las intimidades que brindan los dispositivos móviles, reflexiono sobre las relaciones religiosas que se establecen a través de imágenes y sonidos en los grupos de WhatsApp, además del impacto digital en la dinámica de la autoridad religiosa femenina y su expansión transnacional.

Palabras clave: evangélicos pentecostales; WhatsApp; medios digitales; género; religión.

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Ministries on WhatsApp: gender, sensorialities and ethical-political transformations in the everyday life of evangelical women[1]

The notification of another day of campaigning pops up on the mobile phone screen with a beep. In a few minutes, the lunch hour is filled with dozens of notifications grouped under a single tab of the lock screen, displaying just the most recent message. The rapid turnover of posts stirs my curiosity to browse the group's content. Sent by some of the hundreds of women who belong to the homonymous "*Mulheres Virtuosas*" (Virtuous Women) WhatsApp groups,[2] voice and text messages and images may be simultaneously visualised by whoever is online. I decide to hear the first of the audio messages, in which a firm and confident voice offers a salutation: "The Lord's Peace, Virtuous Women."

The greeting, made by one of the group's administrators, is accompanied by brief interruptions as she responds to the demands of a child crying in the background. Her voice announces that this is the second day of the "campaign for emotional life," inviting participants to pray and fast together. Almost whispering, another voice in the next audio message, played automatically, asks the Holy Spirit to visit her brother-in-law in hospital. The participant explains that she prayed in a low voice because she had recorded the message in the bathroom at her workplace. As more voice messages arrive, the number of instant reactions also increases with replies in the form of brief text messages. Exclamations of "Hallelujah," "Glory to the Lord," "Amen" are accompanied by static images or *gifs*, as well as *emojis* of hands joined in prayer or spread in praise. The colours of the hands range across diverse skin tones with darker hues more prevalent.

While the colours, brightness and movement of the images generate visual

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[2] To maintain the anonymity of the interlocutors involved in this research, all names of people, groups and institutions cited in the article have been changed. Emic terms and expressions heard in fieldwork will be cited in quotation marks and linked to their contexts of enunciation in footnotes whenever further explication is necessary.

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experiences that evoke playfulness, the tones of voice employed in the prayers dictate the particular temporal rhythm of the voice messages, more frequently called "audios." Both the longer and shorter messages include invitations for the listener to close their eyes and imagine not only the person praying but also the people and places to which the prayer is directed. One of the participants sends a photo of a container filled with anointing oil, which she also calls "*azeite*," (olive oil), asking for divine protection while telling the other women by voice message that she is pouring the oil over clothing and photos of her son who at the moment might be found at a *boca de fumo*.[3]

I also wander the corridors of the hospital whose name and district are announced in the messages and reach the bedridden body of a patient whose name, like the name of the son of the previous group member, is announced with a selfie of his face and a request to pray for him. The detailed descriptions of the paths of the divine hand depict it touching each of the patient's organs, just as the olive oil anoints each member of the body of the drug-using son. The sonorities from different tones of voice take the listener through homes, *bocas de fumo* and other spaces where prayers seek to ensure the healing and protection of children, husbands, relatives and the women themselves, who pray together in the prayer group, both synchronously and asynchronously.

Although analysing online daily life was not initially in my plans for a research project that began with church services aimed at evangelical women, the digital interactions on the Virtuous Women WhatsApp groups became increasingly central in the time and space dedicated to fieldwork. Accompanying a routine made of sending and listening to "audios" with sermons, prayers, testimonies and the intense exchange of images on the "*zap*" groups—one of the names by which the application is popularly known in Brazil—opened space for an analytic approach that I adopted prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of this research are presented in my doctoral thesis (Mochel, 2023); here I will highlight its main findings.

Between 2017 and 2022, I worked closely with a group of around one hundred and fifty women, conducting interviews and participant observation, which involved a mixture of online and offline interactions, inspired by the methodology of multimodal ethnography with/on/by the internet proposed by Hine (2020). While the offline interactions involved accompanying worship held in evangelical churches and homes, the online everyday revolved around two WhatsApp groups,

[3] Literally "smoke outlet", boca de fumo is a popular term for spots where illegal drugs are sold in Rio de Janeiro.

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formed exclusively by women, led by a Pentecostal couple, both pastors,[4] not formally linked to any specific church. Among the couple's followers, there were three types of religious membership: those who congregated in small ministries of churches such as the Assembly of God; those who attended large conglomerates of denominations known as neo-Pentecostals, part of what Mafra (2013) called a "floating membership;" and there were also those who were away from the churches, known in this context by the term "deviates".

The ethnography of "prayer groups"[5] as my interlocutors usually called them, encompassed a significant part of the time spent among the group. To call themselves a "Ministry," as we will see below, referred to a dispute between its deinstitutionalized performance and the church as a privileged congregational space. Being a Ministry or a project, as they also indicated, was part of a legitimising action adopted by the couple, to refer to the combination of attending cults and events at which they preached, and participating in the everyday of their prayer groups on WhatsApp.

My entry into the groups as a researcher was known and re-emphasized by myself and by the leaders whenever new participants joined. Unlike much of the research in WhatsApp groups that monitors electoral trends,[6] I did not act anonymously.[7] I participated in the Ministry's everyday online and offline interactions

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4 I alternate between use of the terms "evangelical," "Pentecostal evangelical" or simply "Pentecostal" to refer to my interlocutors' religious membership. This did not include the so-called "historical Protestants." The listed term refers to renewed and Pentecostals, dissidences of Protestantism who credit the revival movements, Pentecost or Pentecostalization with the power to manifest the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues (glossolalia), prophesying, healing and expelling demons (Mafra, 2001). In this context, I found the term "neo-Pentecostals" less, although most of my interlocutors also included churches such as the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus in their religious itineraries.

5 "Prayer group" (grupo de oração in Portuguese) is a term widely used to designate meetings between members who may be of the same religiosity or more limited to particular religious denominations. Over the course of this research, I observed the use of this term in various social media contexts, more directly employed to refer to collectivities formed by groups of charismatic Catholic Christians. Among my interlocutors, its uses were perceived as a continuation of traditional evangelical practices, such as "prayer circles," more focused on collective reading and the guided study of the Bible.

6 In contrast, works such as those by Cesarino (2020) have relied on the profitability of ethnography in WhatsApp groups. The author analyses disputes in the Brazilian far right within what she called the "neoliberal digital architecture." Perspectives like this provide a critique of the simplistic and prejudiced explanations that blame evangelical groups for spreading fake news.

7 In the case of studies that involve risks to the physical integrity of the researcher(s), it should be emphasised that the preoccupations with the positionality of the research on the internet have led to the development of different ethical-methodological approaches that attempt to protect the researcher(s) from potential attacks. Ferguson (2017), for example, adopted the category of "online lurker" for his investigations into crimes and illegal transactions on the "darknet."

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making audiovisual records of various events, such as posters, newspapers and other materials solicited by the interlocutors over the course of the ethnography. I opted not to take part in everyday activities of the groups that involved prayers, fasting and testimonies, although this audiovisual engagement allowed me to circulate as someone who, despite not being evangelical, was, in their words, "working for Jesus."

There were different ways of joining one or more of the women's prayer groups led by the pastor couple. Entering was facilitated by public internet links, shared by Pastor Cristiane in Facebook groups or by invitations like the one I received after the first church service that I attended during fieldwork. The couple's dissemination strategy followed others I came across in different digital prayer groups connected by links that can be readily found in groups of the same social media network, generally bearing the names of churches, pastors and gospel singers, or using search engines like Google. Over the course of my fieldwork, I was added to some of those groups by pastors and church members whom I met during my research but who did not become my interlocutors.

This brief incursion led me to observe that, generally speaking, their members also tended to share content similar to the one in the groups of which I became a member. Evangelical prayer groups are composed of people who may or may not be church leaders or belong to a particular church or denomination. In the same manner as the groups in which I conducted research, members also tend to share prayers in the form of voice, video and text messages, as well as Bible verses, motivational messages, political party memes, job opportunities, publicity of religious events and so on. The possibilities are many, depending on group size, members' connections, prevailing social markers among participants and the rules set by group administrators.

Rather than making comparisons or describing narrative styles and most frequent types of messages, my analytic objective was to understand how the everyday use of smartphones by these women has enabled the construction of religious politics outside the temples. I investigate how those politics are lived as performances of intimacy that involve recording and listening to prayers via WhatsApp audios and shared images. To do so, in the next sections I analyse the institutional and non-institutional itineraries of the pastor couple who ran the prayer groups, as well as how those entry points have led to the formation of new evangelical collectivities among their followers.

Following anthropological approaches focused on understanding the articulations between religion and media (Stolow, 2005; Meyer & Moors, 2006; Machado, 2013; Jungblut, 2012), I analysed ways in which the flexible, mobile, instantaneous and personalised uses of WhatsApp as a "technology of life" (Cruz; Harindra-

nath, 2020) have shaped "turnarounds" (*virações*) typical in our context of socioeconomic inequality. I also sought to show how the ethical-political projects of Pentecostal expansion in the world have transformed and been transformed by the use of digital media, expanding and consolidating mutual aid networks where the digital enables processes articulated by social markers of difference (Lins; Parreiras; Freitas, 2020).

The shifts in space and time generated by the use of smartphones have added, to the functionalities of WhatsApp, new ways of exercising religious authority and the Pentecostal faith among collectivities of evangelical women. Extrapolating more common WhatsApp analytic frameworks to Brazilian electoral dynamics, this analysis seeks to contribute to understanding the role of non-institutionalised Pentecostal religious practices in shaping what Machado (2020) has called an "aesthetics of Pentecostal politics."

"I wasn't born to be a church pastor": mobilities and virações

The trajectory of the Cristiane and Bruno couple, both pastors who then lived as itinerant preachers in diverse Pentecostal churches, was marked by what they described as "a life full of renunciations." Both black, about forty years old and providing for two daughters, the allusion to renunciations suggested a separation between "true pastors" and "faith professionals" (*profissionais da fé*). The couple constantly sought to distinguish themselves from the latter. Advancement in their pastoral careers marked their adherence to an ethical project for exercising what they identified as the "calling" to serve God. This involved continually renouncing forms of leisure and pleasure in their itinerant work as preachers in a number of different Pentecostal churches.

In her various reflections on her calling, Cristiane told me that her desire to live a "calling with women" had developed through an experience of finding the Holy Spirit, from a church service she was watching on TV in her bedroom. Although she had identified as a Pentecostal since she was a teenager, when she was baptised in a branch of the Foursquare Church in Belo Horizonte, she attributed the "unlocking" of her work as a pastor to the "movement of people healing and being liberated," enabled by a pastor who led the service in question. Months later, Cristiane discovered that the church in which she had become interested in TV had arrived in downtown Rio de Janeiro, the city to which she had moved and where she was living when we met. She began to attend the church, accompanied by her husband Bruno, until they were consecrated as pastors.

Like the Foursquare church, funded by a woman and a pioneer in Pentecostal

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female ministry, this church also ordained women pastors. Its large size, with headquarters in São Paulo and many branches distributed throughout Brazil, meant another fundamental difference that placed Bruno and Cristiane in subaltern positions in relation to the institution's other male and female pastors: their situation as voluntary pastors. Unlike the "official" and "100%" pastors, the description for those who "live of their work" (*vivem da obra*) full-time and receive financial assistance to perform their functions in the local church, the couple and other volunteers received only small sums to pay for travel expenses to and from church and spent all their time during the service providing support to the official pastors.

While that lack of recognition highlighted the renunciation involved in living the calling, "caring for women" referred to a parallel project that Cristiane and Bruno began to develop, based on their activities at this church but conducted outside. The "Virtuous Women" Ministry was created in this space as a collective religious experience ever permeated by digital flows:

> The Virtuous Women Project started out with very modest aims. I never imagined it would grow. At the time, the bishop responsible for [the church] asked me to help him provide care and support to those women, who would sometimes ask for help there. There were requests, for example, like, "pastor, I've got a problem in an intimate area." So he, being a man, didn't feel comfortable helping them, in part because it's a spiritual thing and there has to be respect too. So then my husband noticed that the number of women began to grow and I would be staying until 2 am or 3 am helping the women. He said: "please, create a WhatsApp group because I can't stand it anymore!" and so the virtuous women's group was born on WhatsApp. (Interview with pastor Cristiane, conducted face-to-face, 10 June 2017)

Unlike Cristiane, Bruno's participation in the "Virtuous Women" prayer groups was low-profile. As the only man in those groups, his interactions were more formal and limited to accompanying his partner. Except for brief moments when he paid tribute to his wife on special occasions, like her birthday or their wedding anniversary, the couple frequently prayed together in voice messages and video recordings to lead prayer and fasting campaigns, also called "prophetic acts."[8] The digital routine in the groups included strategies encouraging the wom-

[8] Campaigns are occasions when participants unite to meet an objective, generally related to a theme proposed by the religious leader, such as emotional life, financial life, illness healing, and so on. The term "campaign" may also be used as an alternative to the terms "purpose" and "prophetic act," involving practices in which prophesying is achieved through divine

en participants to become "virtuous," the term that the couple and other group members used for them as soon as they became part of the groups' routine.

As well as enabling bonds of intimacy based on markers of gender and sexuality, and allowing space for donations sporadically received from their followers for graces obtained, the kinds of activities conducted by the couple through these media channels were not authorised to the official pastors of the denomination to which they were linked voluntarily. Running a parallel group/Ministry/Project highlighted some of the challenges surrounding practices of religious deinstitutionalization, analysed by Sanchis (2006) in terms of the creation of "institutional gaps," spaces that lead us to reflect on the "place of the religious" in those configurations. Not being a church pastor and, at the same time, needing to "make her name" in a church, had a direct impact on Cristiane's decision to work through media, an experience that echoed how she herself had been invited to exercise her calling as a pastor.

The ambiguities provoked by the discomfort of not having "a headquarters," "a sign," a "register," as the couple used to emphasise, presented both tensions between the presence and absence of the church as a space of worship and the authoritative effects generated by institutional symbols. As shown in the case of stamped paper, as studied by Das and Poole (2004), a materialisation of State regulations and bureaucracies, conversely, being a "church without a name plate" would not sediment in the conventional ways of representing institutional everyday life, usually negotiated through the circulation of objects and scriptures.

The lack of institutional connections, in a context in which it is the institutions that valorise and give legitimacy to pastoral careers, offered the couple what Côrtes (2017) calls a "bastard" position. Analysing the careers of itinerant preachers, the author suggests that these subjects, who circulate in the large urban centres selling testimonies of a past life in crime, drugs, homosexuality or African religions traditions, form an "ex-everything" that makes up the precarious preach market of the world of *virações* that surrounds Pentecostalism as a contemporary urban device (Birman et al., 2017). Unlike the subjects described by Côrtes, however, who were no longer or never were linked to any kind of religious institutionality, Cristiane and Bruno had the limited benefit of being able to "make their names" as volunteer pastors belonging to a large denomination.

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actions in the world and divine intercession in cases considered difficult. Such actions are usually performed collectively and, in some cases, the dynamic of spiritual battle is frequently combined with the execution of specific activities for communicating with God, including the use of objects, "points of contact" such as items of clothing, photos, anointing oil and so forth. The activities and objects frequently recreate biblical passages and refer to the uses made by apostles to work miracles by their faith.

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Investigating pastoral careers developed in this context pointed to critiques of the homogenizations produced by many framings of the evangelical field, which tend to foreground "denunciations" of the sumptuousness of the churches and the ostentation of leaders paid for by tithes requested from the worshippers. Accompanying the pastor couple in question, the research took an opposite direction to this analytic tendency, reflecting instead on ethical-political projects that cover a range of Pentecostal leaders from Brazil's urban peripheries and deepen some of the questions that permeate Pentecostal religiosities and their gender and racial mobilities. For these subjects, the construction of an ordinary Pentecostal career, contrary to what the denunciatory panoramas might lead us to believe, often entails significant limitations for those aspiring to become pastors and, far from what these arguments suggest, may not bring any financial wealth for the religious leaders involved.

The couple's trajectory through the *virações* that traverse Pentecostal careers highlighted ways of not only situating them within these dynamics but also of identifying forms through which spaces pre-established by church hierarchies can be "breached" and a parallel Ministry constructed through the voluntary modality. Furthermore, these paths reflect how "inherent uses" of the mobile phone, as Miller (2013) defined them, shape pastoral careers in this context. The mobilities enabled by the use of smartphones present ways of comprehending how this form of communication promotes changes to income among popular urban classes, mobilised here by exchanges of favours and networks of trust established through contacts in "extended networks."

From the engagement made possible through the use of social media, as well as their circulation in different churches and spaces of the city, the couple managed to create their own channels of communication directly with the worshippers, as well as those women they met in other spaces in which they were invited to preach. Insofar as direct contact with the spiritual world is a differential factor in the Evangelical context, Cristiane and Bruno pursued their paths through these and other devices involved in the 'split structure of authority" that guides the ruptures forged in Pentecostal ethics (Reinhardt, 2021).

Constructing a strategic path of pastoral action through WhatsApp also suggested that the couple adopt orientations convergent with other proposals for mobilities that connect the use of smartphones with regimes of visibility and occupation generated by mobile apps. Similar to many other careers of Brazilian digital influencers in Brazil's urban peripheries, the "bastard" pastoral careers are also "trajectories of social improvement experienced through the insertion in digital environments" (Barros, 2022, p. 20). Those trajectories also reflect the slow-paced social mobility that achieved significant growth in recent economic settings, in the

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wake of the Workers' Party's cycle in office in the early 2000s.

Through the use of mobile phones and WhatsApp, Cristiane and Bruno have built ways of making a living unconnected to their dedication as pastors of a religious institution. To conduct "missionary work" in countries like Italy and Spain in 2018 and 2019, for example, Cristiane received financial assistance, including air tickets and payment of her accommodation costs, from Brazilian immigrants who participated in the prayer groups and lived in these countries. As the couple did not ask for a regularly paid tithe, sponsorship was interpreted as a gift that expressed "help" and "thankfulness" for graces attained by their followers, indicating ways in which these pastors have developed their activities and careers through the specific uses that evangelical agents make of mobile phones and the functionalities of the WhatsApp application.

Transforming houses, kinship and churches

Among the singularities that the ethnography of a Ministry without institutional connections was able to offer this analysis, entering women's prayer groups on WhatsApp presented a means of learning more about the expansion of the everyday devotional life of evangelical women in time and space. In their bedrooms, living rooms, workplaces, journeys on public transport through the city, among many other possible spaces where they can pray, the collective routine of preparation in fasting and prayer campaigns and the sharing of contents that dialogue with their engagements with God indicated that ant moment and place could be prepared for the position of "knee on the ground, mouth in the dust."[9]

From work journeys to the bedrooms of their homes, the pastor couple's calls by audio message to "get down on your knees wherever you are" were answered in dynamics that directly implied distinct relations with time. The practice of praying in the early hours, widespread among diverse Pentecostal evangelical groups, combines with use of the mobile phone for collective prayer in the groups, justified in diverse ways: "At midnight, people are perturbed." "At three in the morning, the time when castes of demons roam," were some of the arguments cited to explain greater availability for prayer at these hours. The justifications also acquired a pragmatic tone, like the prayers made at midday, since the women had more free time to pray during lunch when they would necessarily be at home or taking their

[9] The expression echoes a passage from the Old Testament and corresponds to the position of humiliation and submission before God. See Lamentations 3, 29: "Let him bury his face in the dust – there may yet be hope".

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lunch break at work. Combined with this, arguments backed by biblical interpretations were integrated into everyday life:

> There exists a spirit of death that strikes at midday.
>
> 3 pm is the ninth hour, the time when Jesus consummated his sacrifice on the cross.
>
> Demons, spirits of death, are arrows that fly at midday, the time when husband and children arrive for lunch. (Excerpts from voice messages shared on the WhatsApp groups in 2018 and 2019)

The shifts in the dimensions of space and time highlight ways in which the mobile phone creates formats for praying together, permitting different uses among the women belonging to the Ministry. These formats are well-adapted to the timetables, urban journeys and routines of the evangelical women and leaders, and in many instances can be understood as continuities or extensions of the need for physical presence in the space of the church as the basis for claims to evangelical identity. Here one of the most common examples can be found in the differences, already popularised in this context, between "sunday believers," referring to the presence in church services only on Sundays, and "true believers," indicating the hierarchies that physical presence in the church grants to evangelical belonging.

These classifications were echoed in Pastor Cristiane's constant remarks about the need to distinguish the space of the church from religious uses of the mobile phone. As well as her guidance concerning the importance of each group member continuing to attend their respective churches, after the increase in the number of women participating in the WhatsApp groups during the Covid-19 pandemic, the pastor told me in one of our conversations that she would reduce the frequency of her sermons and replace them with prayers, since the groups' participants were no longer going to their churches. The pastor's concerns indicated experiences that were later shared by some interlocutors with me concerning the substitutive place occupied by everyday online religious life.

For Virgínia, 40 years old and an immigrant in Italy, who told me she had been "churchless" over recent years, this substitution involves her association of the group's main leader with a priority space in the everyday relationship to her faith. Due to the time zone and her exhausting work schedule, Virgínia explains that the pastor "is always available" to hear her "vent" and "cry" during the only times of the day when she too is available. Adding to the welcoming role of someone described as a "mother in faith" and the pastor who "is always available in private," the mobile phone acquires a transformative spatiotemporal dimension in

this everyday religious life. At the same time, the divisions between public and private – which reverberate in the dualisms provoked between church and home, religion and public space – are displaced by Virgínia, who also used the mobile phone to strength her relations collectively with God, supported by temporalities specific to her daily life as an immigrant in Italy. "Always being available" included, above all, making herself available at less common times to be awake, like the early morning, or being able to adapt to the busy routine of work. Furthermore, contact with the pastor restricted practices that would allow warmer forms of interacting with people and living religious experience:

> I miss revival so much! That wonderful feeling you have of letting everything pour out, you know? I remember that one day I went to a service and it all began to pour out, I was so overwhelmed with the presence of the Holy Spirit, I wept! […] Like, sometimes you want to dance. Where is it a sin to dance for God? It's a form of praise, you"re dancing for God! Obviously, always with decorum and decency… but people stare at you! […] So then, this warmth of prayer, crying, jumping, clapping – there is none of that here! (Interview with Virgínia conducted via video call on WhatsApp, January 2021)

Like Virgínia, Luíza, another Brazilian immigrant in Italy, described the experiences in Italian churches as "very cold" and "more traditional," alluding to the lack of manifestation of spiritual gifts. As well as providing a direct space of comfort and support for her suffering, Luíza emphasises that Pastor Cristiane was able to provide a space of advice for her doubts about how to practise the Word – a space she had been unable to find in prior contacts among the churches she had frequented. Referring to her participation in youth groups and her contacts with other pastors in various churches, Luíza told me about questions that remained unanswered and how she had received the fame of being a "rebellious pearl."

In these networks in which Virgínia, Luíza, their family members and other virtuous women took part, Pastor Cristiane's close presence appeared in contrast to the distance adopted in the kind of pastoral work practised in institutionalised spaces. Similar to what Miller (2021) highlights concerning the contextual use of smartphones, the cases of these immigrant evangelical women indicate experiences that evoke connections with the memory of the places where they were born and raised. Setting out from diverse examples of these uses, the author explores the notion of smartphones as "transportal homes." Integrated with the use of WhatsApp and other mobile applications, these devices have proportioned other ways of conviviality more acceptable than those of the traditional family, a process that, for its part, has been modifying family and intergenerational relations.

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Miller indicates that the analogies between uses of digital and domestic space are not new and were described by diverse authors in relation to digital experiences prior to the use of social media on smartphones. However, he also reflects on how the innovation caused by affective dimensions of the personalization and mobile capacity of smartphones. As Miller puts it, "the smartphone is a form of home that has never previously existed" (2021, p. 867). I consider this idea important to reflect on how the meanings of the church have been reworked among evangelical Brazilian immigrants, insofar as their condition of multi-belonging and deterritorialization (Appadurai, 1996) is related to affective memories experienced in their "homes," as they call their country of origin.

However, it is not always in the collective dimension that many women choose to live these new processes. Unlike Virgínia, who was a member of one of the WhatsApp groups, Luíza encountered in the exchange of instant messages with the pastor *no privado* (in private) a way of establishing contacts with God that proved unsuccessful in the churches she had frequented. Luíza's experience identifies how women's links to the Ministry may be established not necessarily by one's presence in the group; links based on mediations with the pastor "in private" may also be a way of inhabiting notions of evangelical belonging.

While the meanings of home, kinship and church are transformed for the interlocutors, the digital dynamics between Pentecostal women's collectivities also build new pastoral careers. By forming part of a digitised format of interaction with their leader, the participants of the women's prayer groups establish a relation of trust that involves practices aimed at divulging and growing the Ministry. In public or private, these women soon begin to authorise the sharing of content like testimonies and prayers, especially those sent as audio messages, allowing the pastor to publish them on social media and share them among the different prayer groups she leads. Even though Luíza and other women do not participate directly in the everyday online activities of the group, therefore, Cristiane's mediation and, to a lesser extent, that of Pastor Bruno too, mean that they become part of this collectively with the *encaminhamentos* (forwards)[10] that cultivate the feeling of a multitude of shared voices in the prayer groups.

Unlike Luíza, whose contact is limited to the bond developed with the pastor "in private," Virgínia is connected in different spaces and synchronously or asyn-

[10] The "forward" function was adopted by WhatsApp in 2014, allowing the user to send the same message to different contacts. Since 2019, the company Meta, which manages the application, imposed a limit for simultaneous forwarding of the same message, set to five contacts or groups at the same time. From 2020, messages identified as "forwarded many times" were limited to forwarding content to one contact or group at a time.

chronously with other virtuous women, enabling them to form closer relationships with the divine. By listening to a recorded prayer or by praying together, both establish communications among themselves to strengthen their communications *with* God. The strategies adopted in the forwarding of messages, videos and other media used by the pastor couple in this context form part of a wider set of shifts that operate here. As I indicated in the previous section, these are caused both by the flexibility in their "voluntary" pastoral careers and by the spatiotemporal dislocations involved in the religious use of smartphones and mobile apps by evangelical women participating in the groups. Finally, I also analyse the construction of this Ministry from a perspective that considered the sensory dimensions contained in sending images, recording voice messages and listening to audios as privileged channels for establishing what Pentecostal evangelicals call "intimacy with God."

The mobile phone as a "battlefield"

> Pray together, don"t just listen. Many miracles don"t happen because you don"t open your mouth.
>
> There are women who live in Portugal London Italy and the United States as well as those who live in OTHER states and who say that even through the audios, they feel God's presence.[11]

The everyday habits of sharing images and recording voice messages during prayers, combined with the pastor couple's practice of conducting sermons through voice messages, foment sensory experiences in which the mobile phone becomes an instrument that leads to action in battles against demons that attack Pentecostal evangelical families all the time. Through the projection of a voice that "becomes unashamed," the "opening of the mouth to pray," as the group members frequently say in their prayers and the pastor encourages in her sermons, recording and listening to audio messages embody virtues desired in these behaviours.

In this sense, the bodily dispositions collectively shared through the circulation of audios in the prayer groups received frequent stimuli from their members. In addition to Pastor Cristiane's sending of "special blessings" to the women who sent their prayers in this format, participants explained their reasons if they failed

[11] Excerpts from voice and text messages, respectively, shared on the "Virtuous Women" prayer groups in 2018.

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to send voice messages during the campaigns and shared their responses in other formats, like texts, emojis and stickers.[12] While some women claimed to have lost their voice due to health conditions such as a flu, or to "feeling ashamed to speak to God" and other reasons that indicated a variety of issues impeding them from contributing, other women indicated the importance of audio messaging by soliciting voice messages. That way, prayers would reach those who needed them, such as ill relatives who could join in prayer with the voice of those who pray remotely via WhatsApp.

The requests for audio messages did not concern just prayers but also included other frequent practices, such as the posting of video and voice messages by members attending the events to which the pastor couple were invited to preach. Over the period when I was making audiovisual recordings at diverse moments during church services, participants who were not present at these events asked me and other women to send "more audios" for them to continue to "receive blessings" and "pray together." These different situations indicate two paths that called my attention to the development of ethical dispositions related to listening.

On one hand, some forms of group participation during moments of prayer are privileged in a way that resources like text messages and images, illustrations, emojis and stickers are less in demand. On the other hand, the voice messages (not the text messages and other formats) containing prayers and testimonies by the participants were the only content shared by the pastor between the different prayer groups she administered, producing the sensation of multitudes of women in different countries who pray simultaneously.

The pedagogies designed to cultivate discipline through prayers and sermons in audio messages also imprint sensory conditions distinct to the messages shared in other formats by WhatsApp. In his work on listening to sermons recorded on tape cassettes among Muslims in Egypt, Hirschkind (2006, 2021) argues that differences exist between listening to sermons on cassette tapes and listening to music. While the music promotes more spontaneous serenity and receptivity for contact with the divine, the sermons foment what the author calls practices of "moral progression," which primarily involve developing the skill of carefully "listening with the heart" (Hirschkind, 2021, p. 215).

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[12] Stickers first appeared on WhatsApp in 2019 and enabled an expansion of the formats used to share memes and the addition of other modes of communication via the app (Germano, 2019). They comprise small icons with static or moving images, the production of which by users is facilitated by readily accessible resources, such as free apps designed for this activity. These production dynamics do not apply to individuals only but also to groups formed by companies and non-institutionalized organisations that use stickers to increase the divulgation of their content.

In this sense, in the context studied by the author, paying attention when one is listening makes a difference when it comes to deepening the practices of moral progression. Listening to audio messages while performing everyday domestic tasks, commuting to and from work or when going to sleep was common among the group members, practices stimulated by the leaders as ways of disseminating the Word through voice messages. Such advantages enhanced by WhatsApp also interact with the social markers of differences at play. Among different levels of schooling, for example, audios and videos can be prioritised by those who have greater difficulty in reading and writing, as already pointed out by Spyer (2018).

Insofar as this collective moment of prayer was also experienced as private, the experience of recording and hearing audios was conducted in places described as "war corners," spaces where other people are physically absent. In the image below, sent by an interlocutor who was describing her "prayer room" while we were talking about the WhatsApp groups in our interview, we can clearly observe elements revealing the importance of demarcating a reserved space in which she could "wage war" through prayer. In my conversations on this topic with other evangelical women, they too indicated that they had "prayer corners" that were very often not rooms but smaller spaces in the home marked out by the presence of religious elements used during the prayer, such as a Bible, olive oil, grape juice, bread and so on.

Image 1: photo of a prayer room. "Prayer Room. Victory guaranteed!!! In Jesus' name!!!"
Source: Sent by a research interlocutor. Collected on 01/11/2021.

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Images 2 and 3: illustrations shared on WhatsApp.
"Warrior only lowers her head to pray... And raises to win..."
"Let Us Pray Together. Pray unceasingly." [verse number]
Source: prayer groups, authorship unknown. Collected on: 04/12/2018 and 04/23/2018.

In parallel, the circulation of images[13] determines other modes through which intimacies between women were established in these prayer groups. I consider the domestic registers of campaigns and the photographs of loved ones – most of them selfies of faces either smiling or lying sick in hospitals or located in situations of urban violence – to have a significant effect on the creation of bonds that keep the women participating in the group. Differently to what occurs with the playful appeal of colourful gifs, stickers and emojis, with dynamic effects that simulate movements, the photos taken with smartphone cameras stimulate considerable engagement from the participants during prayers.

This engagement takes place, above all, by the use of images asking for prayers to be made for people who do not belong to the group. Accompanied by text or voice messages that explain the requests for prayers for 'sons in drug trafficking," "daughters in prostitution," women friends in hospital, couples at risk of divorcing, among many other motives, these photographs enabled specific dynamics of trust and intimacy in the prayer groups.

[13] At this stage of participant observation, I asked my interlocutors permission for the use of images, audio messages and text messages shared on the WhatsApp groups. As I did not have direct contact with all the participants of the groups, I used only content shared by those women whose contact with me extended to interviews and/or face-to-face meetings during fieldwork. On other ethical agreements established on the use of information shared within the groups, see Mochel (2023).

Images 4 and 5: records of prayer campaign participation on WhatsApp, assembled by interlocutors. Source: prayer groups. Collected on: 02/16/2018 and 06/14/2019.

The above images, sent during two different fasting and prayer campaigns, indicate parallels with the spontaneity of home photographs, resulting from collective moments of sociality. At the same time, the ludic nature of memes, gifs and stickers related to the moments of prayer promote other modalities of engagement. Although they take up most of the mobile screens, these images did not receive responses from the participants but were shared repeatedly and in large numbers. Along with the illustrations sent en masse by different interlocutors, this includes the images linked to the fasting and prayer campaigns that the leaders shared from collections available for free on the internet, located using search engines, or sent on WhatsApp by other contacts (see, for example, images 2 and 3).

The different engagements that traverse the illustrations of unknown authors are reflected in the importance that their combination with audio or text exerts for the participants An example of this was the message shared in one of the prayer groups by a participant who asked for someone to share with her a "passage from Jonah," a reference to a biblical figure present in a "ministration" of Pastor Cristiane that had circulated in previous days. More than simply "annexes to the main text of the ethnography," these images are "objects of a self-representation" (Silva, V., 2015, p. 59) and indicate relational dynamics specific to the campaigns, offered with even greater frequency among the groups during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The differential dynamics generated by sharing authorial images are highlighted by the anthropologist Beatriz Lins (2019). She indicates how the arrival of frontal cameras on smartphones generated significant transformations in people's uses of imagery. As well as emojis, gifs, stickers and other image formats that permeate the playful everyday life of WhatsApp groups, taking and sharing photos of oneself in an amateur aesthetic that marks the tone of shared intimacy has become

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one of the main ways of establishing communications in message apps. According to the author, 'sending and receiving images is a social interaction that invokes notions of loyalty and trust" (Lins, 2019, p. 66).

Like listening to audio messages, looking at static and moving images, user-made or generated by unknown people, and watching and listening to videos have provided the sensory conditions for the emergence of ethical-political projects in which Pentecostal religiosities are strongly engaged. In the bodily and subjective experience of listening to sermons, audio recording prayers and producing content like photos and videos during church services and other festivities in the churches, the religious engagement of evangelical women on WhatsApp delineates a devotional and occupational space whose aesthetics and circulation have enabled transformations in the ways of exercising religious authority, as well as enhanced the exercise of faith in non-institutionalized religious experiences.

Final considerations

Over the course of this article, I have argued how the uses of prayer groups by evangelical women configure a digital routine for which WhatsApp, as a religious device, becomes a key technology for new ways of exercising institutionality, here lived in the form of Ministries. The attribution of greater value to the sharing of voice messages develops sensibilities in which the everyday hearing of audios produced by the interlocutors themselves enables the emergence of ethical projects and performances, expanding digitally-mediated female circulations. The uses of WhatsApp are provoked by gender, race, class and generation mobilities that stretch the boundaries between the institutional and the non-institutional and invite us to reflect on the privacy provided by this application as a safe space to live multiple ways of being evangelical.

In addition, I demonstrate how these digital collectivities have promoted the emergence of new careers, consolidated through dynamics of *viração* (turnaround) in the Pentecostal pastorate. Among believers, the space and time travel mediated by the use of cell phones does not simulate the repetition or extension of institutional daily life but, rather, means a deep self-cultivation of listening to prayer and training in new forms of exercising the Pentecostal faith.

During the period of research on which this article was based, the proliferation of analyses of elections and WhatsApp groups – and, more recently, Telegram – formed by evangelicals has produced diagnoses about these contexts as "new churches." I consider those interpretations limiting, in the face of the complex and original possibilities that setting up groups on this app has allowed. Aside from

not corresponding to what I heard from my research interlocutors, who constantly sought to differentiate the WhatsApp groups in which they shared their everyday experiences of prayer from religious denominations frequented (or not) by them, the relations that those collectivities of women establish with digital technologies mean ruptures with what was considered oppressive, the target of "contaminations". Many examples in this regard concerned the moral conflicts experienced in churches, and also the negative experiences related to the "politicisation" which, according to them, started to hit these spaces more strongly since the election of former president Jair Bolsonaro in 2018.

If there is, in this sense, an expansion in the notions of church and a conflict in relation to the analytical model of exercise of the Christian faith, considering digital religious life only as a continuity of the temple or dependent on it underestimates the capacity of its agents both to produce new formats to strengthen the faith collectively as of being evangelicals today. WhatsApp evangelical groups are not necessarily "church groups." This term is but a simplification that fails to correspond to the forms in which members name them, among which "prayer groups" is more frequent.

Insofar as churches have always been places of dispute, linking any religious practices to church buildings not only relies on institutionalised notions of these spaces, but also results in their enclosure within infrastructures materialised in architectures and liturgies specific to their original contexts. Adopting this reflection is important to avoid reproducing notions in which online dynamics are separated from and/or secondary and subordinate to the offline. Rather than pursuing hypotheses of the actualization or replication of church formats in the digital world, I point to other materialities and sensorialities affecting the Pentecostal faith, which may be physical, presented mainly through the use of smartphones, or which may adopt the format of images, soundscapes, liturgical artefacts and other objects that compose Pentecostal interactions.

Evangelical groups or "on WhatsApp have wrongly become the subject of analyses that link them exclusively to the disseminations of fake news. The ethnographic conviviality with such groups leads to the reflection that the absence of positionings critical of the conflation of "evangelicals" with the "far right" in public debate is just as worrying as the salvationism of these analyses and their ignorance of some of the basic dynamics of everyday evangelical life on WhatsApp.The non-institutionalized dynamics of this research offered the possibility of not conceiving prayer groups as extensions of evangelical churches, positioning WhatsApp images, texts and sounds as central elements of a religious life beyond the temples. In analysing the greetings of good morning/afternoon/evening, composed with flowers, hearts, sparkles, motivational words and biblical content—that in Brazil led to

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the creation stereotype of "zap aunts and uncles"—I sought to broaden the critical understanding of the religious imaginary as a transforming dimension of the uses of WhatsApp in our country.

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