ABBA PAI CHURCH AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: NEW LINKS OF THE CHURCH PRESENT IN CYBERSPACE

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to bring evidence of how the evangelical church Abba Pai is positioning itself in its theological and philosophical action within the cyberspace, since the COVID-19 pandemic has brought different approaches to the church in the Brazilian context (TAVARES, 2020; MAZZAROLO, ZANINI, 2021). In a dialogue with the philosophy of religion, the area of digital technologies and theology I seek to trace the paths in which the search for God manifests itself within the cyberspace (SPADARO, 2011), through the analysis of interactions present on the church's YouTube channel, which is also present in other media in the virtual world. Thenceforth, it will be displayed different means by which the faithful person search for the divine no longer only in the stone temple, but within the digital realm present in the mediatized and highly globalized contemporaneity (PUNTEL, 2010).

Keywords: theology; ciberspace; pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Talking about the pandemic today is apparently no longer something new, at least since the beginning of the current crisis caused by COVID-19 since its outbreak at the end of 2019. Many were the different measures taken by diversified entities in society, both those primarily responsible for health and educational institutions (LIMA, 2020) in order to protect the health of the population in face of self-contagion of the virus and the imminent danger of death brought by it (SILVA, 2021).

Faced with this scenario of constant changes, new practices have been seen regarding human contact and the transcendent being in the virtual space. With a significant increase in the number of hours in which individuals spend their time within the cyberspace, it is noticed how this expansion in the use of digital technologies also affects the way in which human beings express,

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communicate as well as interact with their transcendental faith within digital reality (PUNTEL, 2010; SINGH, 2017).

With the closure of many religious temples due to preventive health measures, there was also a large increase in the number of live broadcasts, preaching and sermons being given through different media and social networks (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, among others), from in order to nourish and strengthen the faith of different Christian groups in the face of the challenges posed by the pandemic scenario. One of these churches that caught my attention during these pandemic months is called *Abba Pai Church*, which is located in Criciúma, in the south of Santa Catarina. The church has taken measures to protect its faithful as well as working in different ways within the virtual world, through Christian training courses, transmission of online services and conferences, as well as the creation of Christian preaching channels in the Spanish language, which is available on YouTube[1].

Therefore, in this article I bring some preliminary results of research from my postdoctoral internship in Theology concerning this church and on how the manifestations of faith of followers are expressed within cyberspace (SBARDELOTTO, 2012). Therefore, this article is organized as follows: The first section covers, within several axioms of sociology, philosophy of religion and information technologies, the contingent transformations that technologies have brought to the world and how these influence within the contemporary mediatized theological spectrum (ANDREOLLA, 2012; SILVA, 2021).

The second section demonstrates the growth of cybertheology and how this field of knowledge is in constant contact with the philosophy of religion and with the heterogeneous ways of doing theology today, since the digital world will possibly be increasingly present in people's lives. human being in the coming years (LIBÂNIO, 2002; GRÄB, 2002). The third section lists the bibliographic context of the research, carried out within different web pages

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[1] Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-4b1YvB5dFQNAj5vrRzCbA>. Acesso em: 4 Jan. 2022.

related to the Abba Pai church, demonstrating the manifestations of the faithful within cyberspace and the attitudes of the church in the face of the pandemic scenario. The fourth section covers the preliminary considerations of this research, pointing out future paths of pertinent investigations within cybertheology and how it intertwines within different philosophical fields of human knowledge.

Let's briefly move on to the contemporary, pandemic, global and media scenario we are living in.

THE CONTEMPORARY PANDEMIC: GLOBAL, MEDIATED AND THEOLOGICAL

The coronavirus pandemic, which has already affected a vast section of the world's population, brought with it not only a change in the way human beings deal with their health, with life, but even with the very end of their existence (MAZZAROLO, ZANINI, 2020). There were many articles published in 2020 and 2021 referring to the complexities emerging from the pandemic and how it drastically influenced the way human beings behave in the face of divine reality and the search for God in the face of an initially chaotic scenario deeply marked by uncertainties (LIMA, 2020; TAN, 2020; SILVA, 2021).

Despite the countless and seemingly countless negative points associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, as research in the area of information technologies points out (CASTELLS, 2005; SILVA, 2021), there has been an exponential growth in the use of digital technologies until the present day. We are currently living in a period of rapid technological and virtual transformations. As Pierre Lévy (1999) points out, we are entering a new way of producing culture, which is no longer present only in the face-to-face context, but is constituted as a *cyberculture*, one in which communications, encounters, exchanges of opinions, dialogues and even friendships are too much within virtual loci.

With the advance of globalization, the theological tectonic plates are also moving, bringing with them a time of change, a sensation of apparent

existential emptiness, with the absence of sense, meaning, norms and the presence of recurrent crises and uncertainties, in a true cultural metamorphosis (PUNTEL, 2010). Cyberculture also causes the creation of cyberspace, which not only has its material infrastructure for communication through media and digital devices, but an oceanic universe full of information, which can lead to irreversibly different digital universes. To this end, globalization denotes the feeling of a global village (CASTELLS, 2005), in which the notion of otherness is reflected in human actions within a prism of understanding that we are, despite our multiple differences, human beings above all else, with feelings, intentions, and hope for a better future.

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Additionally, in the current era, known as the era of information overload, technologies previously conceived as eternal, such as television, are perceived in the homes of the general population as a background noise, as a hum of the world. This is due to the simple fact that human beings are increasingly connected to a screen that is smaller than their TV in the living room: the screen of their smartphone or tablet. From the expression "there are links", in biblical parallel to what God said at the moment of the creation of the world ("there is light"), the human being finds himself with approximately another 4.88 billion of his countrymen within the virtual space

(SBARDELOTTO, 2018) and is potentially encouraged to interact with the agents there.

Because of this, there are profound changes in the way human beings behave in the digital world. As Prensky (2010) points out, the massive immersion of digital technologies causes two distinct groups to emerge in this global, mediatized and liquid scenario: *digital natives* and *digital immigrants*. The first group comprises those who were born after the 1990s and who are already used to the use of digital technologies in different contexts, since they are uninterruptedly connected and possibly are not capable of imagining their daily routines without the connection with the Internet. Internet, your smartphones and your colorful, multifunctional and multisemiotic tools. The second group commonly translates those who were born before the advent of the Internet and who are still facing numerous challenges in knowing how to use different applications and audiovisual communication elements (SINGH, 2017).

As Sbardelotto (2018) points out in his studies on the process of mediatization of society, the one in which all representation and production of meaning is linked to the use of digital media which mediate the construction and understanding of human meaning, virtual interactions affect the life of the human being as a whole, in its political, television, cultural, medicinal, biological, physical surroundings and, undoubtedly, its search and sharing of faith. That is, the challenges are multiple not only for a given social reality: they multiply uninterruptedly on a daily basis. This can be seen, for example, in the way products will be sold in a given store, in how the political campaign will be carried out in a social network, in how classes in an academic center will be carried out, as well as how they affect the way faith Christian faith will be shared within the virtual ocean (SPADARO, 2012).

As can be seen briefly so far, we live in an era of *Information Reform,* which is apparently faster than that of the Protestant Reformation era, in a *virtuelle Gemeinschaft* (virtual community internally connected by the cybernetic network), with transformations that come no longer from the inside

out – as occurred in Luther's Protestant Reformation (PUNTEL & SBARDELOTTO, 2017). The information reform makes up a movement that comes from the global culture, which is entering the different spaces in which the human being finds himself. The church, within this context, would consequently not be short of this entire global metamorphic process (SILVA, 2021).

Let's see briefly in the next section how the ecclesial reality is behaving in the face of the challenges briefly mentioned above and what are the potentialities arising from the use of digital technologies in the contemporary scenario.

THE CHURCH IN CYBERSPACE AND THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

Theologian Antonio Spadaro states that the main difficulty of the contemporary church is no longer found in how the church will make use of digital technologies, but in the way of living the faith within the virtual scenario. As the aforementioned author points out (SPADARO, 2012), digital technologies have transformed the relationship between human beings and a technological apparatus, which has led to the creation of a new existential locus, in which faith and the encounter with the transcendent are also made possible with the speed of a click. As Sbardelotto (2018) points out, the Word became Bit and is dwelling among us in cyberspace.

This global movement of technological use ends up promoting the privatization of religion, since the previously existing religious and absolutist monopolies are being depraved of their power over faith, which is shared in a digital sea with diverse opinions and heterogeneous criticisms of the Christian faith. (ANDREOLLA, 2012). Thus, the phenomenon of religious pluralism is continually increasing, which is no longer dependent on a single family, ecclesiastical or cultural tradition. Cities and urban centers symbolize this religious diversity present in the individual's ability to choose his faith based on conveniences and also advantages that a given religion can bring to his worldview. That is, the search for faith is not dead, but is increasingly centered

on not only collective interests, but predominantly rooted in the individual scope (TAVARES, 2020; SILVA, 2021).

I briefly list here the new possibilities and challenges of the Christian faith in today's cyberspace. Concerning the possibilities for growth in the expression of faith, new ways of manifesting the Christian faith within the pandemic scenario are perceived (SILVA, 2021). The use and creation of pages on social networks, as in the historical moment of the creation of Pope Benedict XVI's personal Twitter in order to bring a greater proximity of the personal figure of the religious leader to his audience, as well as the creation of numerous pages called Catholic , evangelicals, Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals, point to new ways of experiencing the contemporary Christian faith, increasingly in personal contact with the various existing faith communities (LIMA, 2015).

There is also a significant increase in the movement of the Christian community to other realities previously unattainable within the temporal and spatial axioms (SPADARO, 2012). The believer who previously congregated only within their local reality is now also able to enter classes, seminars, congresses, online courses, conferences and other religious movements within digital platforms such as Zoom, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube (ANDREOLLA, 2012).

In this way, the ancient stone cathedrals became true virtual cathedrals, without material borders and gradually becoming timeless. Movements within cyberspace enable both creation and the encounter with the sacred. Consequently, the theological centralization previously represented by a few religious institutions, now becomes a common good shared by numerous denominations. There are new symbioses emerging daily within the numerous faith communities existing in Brazil and around the world (GRÄB, 2002; TAN, 2020).

The creation of personal profiles on social networks such as Instagram also allows for some maintenance and guidance regarding the archetype of

faith expected by Christians of a given denomination. As will be seen below, a religious leader's page can greatly influence the behavior of his faithful followers, embodying Christian attitudes within an increasingly plural world (MAZZAROLO, ZANINI, 2020; SILVA, 2021).

On the other hand, some challenges arise in relation to the new digital world previously presented. Although there are religious temples that expand in the dissemination of the message of faith to the world, those that are unable to act in the face of the complex tangle of ways of presenting audiovisual resources in a striking way tend to lose their attention in the face of the ocean of virtual possibilities. That is, there is apparently competition for the attention of loyal Internet users, who may (stop) following a given community of faith simply because they (not) know how to communicate faith in the face of contemporary virtual logic (SBARDELOTTO, 2012; SPADARO, 2012). This phenomenon can lead to the suppression of faith communities that previously existed only locally and that may become extinct due to the fact that they are unable to meet the relevant technological needs for more significant digital communication within cyberspace (ANDREOLLA, 2012).

Another important prism on which we should weigh our attention concerns the depth of faith that the new faithful Internet user may be living primarily within cyberspace. Complex subjects involving political, existential, philosophical, economic, sociocultural axioms could not presumably be discussed or extremely summarized in a post on a social network (PUNTEL, 2010).

In this way, the faithful internet user may become a mere spectator or "spiritual beggar" of a virtually shared faith, no longer experiencing the complexity involved in the face-to-face communion of a community of faith. Subjects with great depth essentially denote the meeting of human beings who normally discuss closely relevant subjects for the growth and maturation of the Christian faith: the importance of social works, charity, missionary effort, the study of the Bible in a deeper and more systematic way. (PUNTEL, SARDELOTTO, 2017). As Sbardelotto (2012) points out, these are one of the

multiple problems that may interfere with the Christian faith in the coming decades and it is up to the theologian who is attentive and sensitive to these changes to have a more contextualized and humane look at the church that will emerge in the face of such sudden changes. reported in the previous paragraphs.

At this moment, we move to the context of the research and preliminary analyzes of the research locus of this article.

CONTEXT AND RESEARCH ANALYSIS: THE ABBA PAI CHURCH IN CYBERSPACE

The context to be analyzed in this article, as reported in the introduction, refers to the evangelical church Abba Pai Church, which has been growing in its activities in Brazil. It was chosen because it is a church that seems to be in tune with the global changes that are taking place within the virtual environment, that is, a place that is not limited only to stone block temples, but that is present within of cyberspace (SPADARO, 2012; ANDREOLLA, 2012; PUNTEL, SBARDELOTTO, 2017). As a researcher and Christian, I have already been able to visit this church locally and personally get to know the work that is carried out within the context of Criciúma, as well as visualize its performance in the virtual locus. Therefore, I believe it is pertinent to report what has been happening within the theological and philosophical practices of this church in the face of the scenario previously described in the theoretical framework of this article.

The church is located in the city of Criciúma and has different channels of action on the internet (Instagram[1], Facebook[2], Spotify[3], Deezer[4], YouTube[5], Hotmart[6], among others), through the transmission of services, courses, conferences and events of a Christian nature and currently has a channel in

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[1] Available on: <https://www.instagram.com/abbapaichurch/>. Retrieved on: 10 Jan. 2022.
[2] Available on: <https://www.facebook.com/pastortelmomartinello/> Retrieved on: 07 Jan. 2022.
[3] Available on: <https://www.facebook.com/abbapaichurchoficial/>. Retrieved on: 05 Jan. 2022.
[4] Available on: <https://open.spotify.com/show/0FIYzDpLl0TJ7RUan8mfPY>. Retrieved on: 05 Jan. 2022.
[5] Available on: < https://www.youtube.com/c/AbbaPaiChurch?app=desktop>. Retrieved on: 09 Jan. 2022.
[6] Available on: < https://casadeisabel.club.hotmart.com/login>. Retrieved on: 10 Jan. 2022.

Spanish on YouTube. The church is presided over by pastors Telmo and Viviane Martinello, who are married and have two daughters. Both pastors also have their personal profiles on the most different platforms mentioned above.

Figura 0-1 Figure 1: Screenshots taken from the social network Facebook of Pastor Telmo Martinello (1), from the Abba Pai Church page on Instagram (2) and from the social network Facebook (3). Fonte: o AUTOR (2022).

Pastor Viviane Martinello, for example, was recognized by Instagram with the blue stamp of verified account on the social network, which attests to the authenticity and relevance of the profile within the social network. This seal, as pointed out by Oliveira and Estefani (2019), points to the presence of an authentic account and a public and notable figure, a celebrity or global brand or entity that represents a person or organization. That is, such recognition of the social network indicates the relevance that both this pastor and her ecclesial reality have brought within cyberspace.

On her personal YouTube channel, the pastor has more than nineteen million visits, since December 19th and currently has more than four hundred and twenty-two thousand subscribers. Her online course called Casa de Isabel is aimed at Christian women, bringing teachings about the life of the Christian woman today and how she can make a difference in the face of so many injustices in relation to the female gender in society, the very constitution of the home and the how to bring perseverance and lightness into marriage and the Christian family. My own wife, for example, was able to take this course

and was able to learn a lot about the use of the Christian faith in contemporary times and how to be a Christian in an increasingly fragmented and liquid world.

My research clipping, however, given the complexity of multiple actions in the virtual scenario briefly described above, will be done in the analysis of comments made in the most watched sermon on the YouTube channel of the church Abba Pai Church, which is called *Meu Testemunho*, with a number of views exceeding four hundred and twenty thousand. It is interesting to mention that the same video, available on the pastor's own YouTube channel, is described under a different name, namely, *When God Restored My Marriage*, with a total of over almost a million views. Such a choice of different title possibly brought a wider range of interest, as it seemed to bring something more personal and intimate, which the audience would identify with when hearing the story of his marriage restoration.
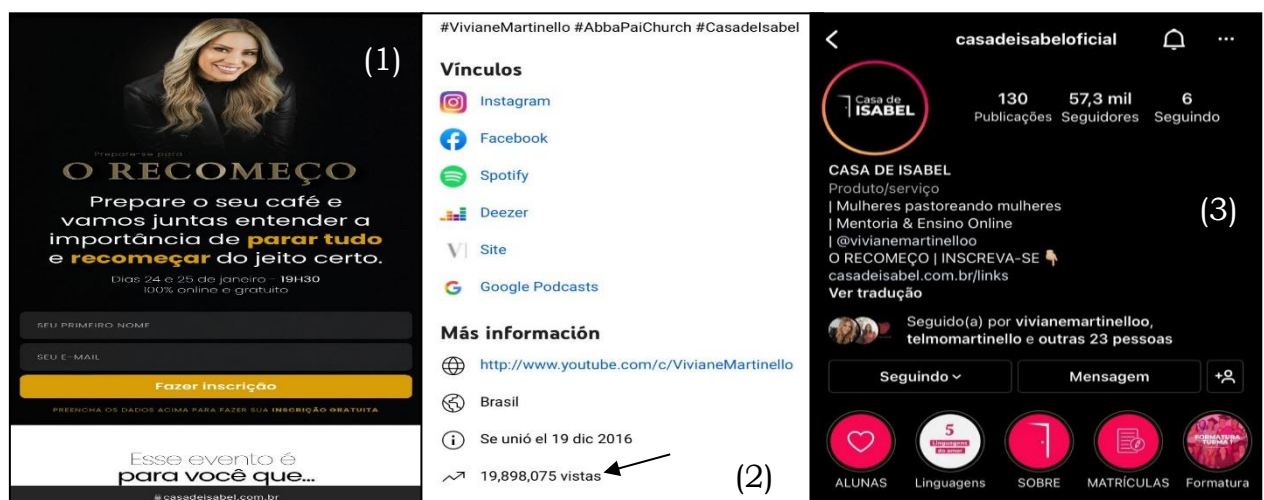

Figura 0-2 Figure 2: Screenshots of the Casa de Isabel course by Pastor Viviane Martinello (1); from her YouTube channel containing the number of views (2) and the official Instagram page of the Casa de Isabel course (3). Fonte: o AUTOR (2022).

This sermon mentioned above was chosen due to the very high number of views – which points to a highly relevant subject in society: the restoration and preservation of marriage – as well as the fact that in this small clipping it is possible to visualize the interaction of different followers and faithful within of cybernetic space (SPADARO, 2012). Such an analysis takes place within a

perspective of a digital bibliographic nature (MARTIN, GASKELL, 2008), in an emic analysis in its quest to understand the vision of the users present there through their own points of view regarding the opinions, regrets, and feelings expressed while viewing the aforementioned Christian message. Let's move on to the analysis of this cybernetic interaction of faith.

ANALYSIS OF INTERACTIONS IN CYBERSPACE: THE ABBA PAI CHURCH CASE

In the image below, I present the frozen screen (screenshot) of the sermon given by Pastor Viviane, as well as small images below it, containing interactive comments from Internet users regarding the ministering of the pastor on the Abba Pai Church channel on YouTube, with their respective numbers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6).

Already in the first image (1) you can see the follower's comment by *Débora Chagas*, who comments that she is experiencing a difficult period in her married life, given that her spouse no longer wants to go to church. The follower's comment got three likes, and is immediately answered as shown by the other image numbers. In image (2) it can be seen that the user *Neide Santos* encourages *Débora Chagas* to follow Jesus again, since He would be waiting for *Débora* to encourage her in her Christian journey.

In image (3), a possible follower named *Vet Testando* says she is letting her heart rest in God, saying prayers for God to help her change her life, for this to be replicated within her marriage. In image (4) you can see another comment made a few days later by follower *Gudyarllen Santos*, who tells follower *Débora Chagas* that she is experiencing the same situation, reaffirming the faith of both by saying that God will honor them. Apparently on the same day, follower *Débora Chagas* responds to *Gudyarllen's* comment using the belief confirmation expression "Amen!!!". It can be seen here how the virtual space makes it possible to create both comments about the message given by the pastor, as well as the creation of a mutual support network, with people who share the same faith, but who possibly have never

met in person, reaffirming the positive potential allowed by cyberspace (ANDREOLLA, 2012; PUNTEL, 2010).
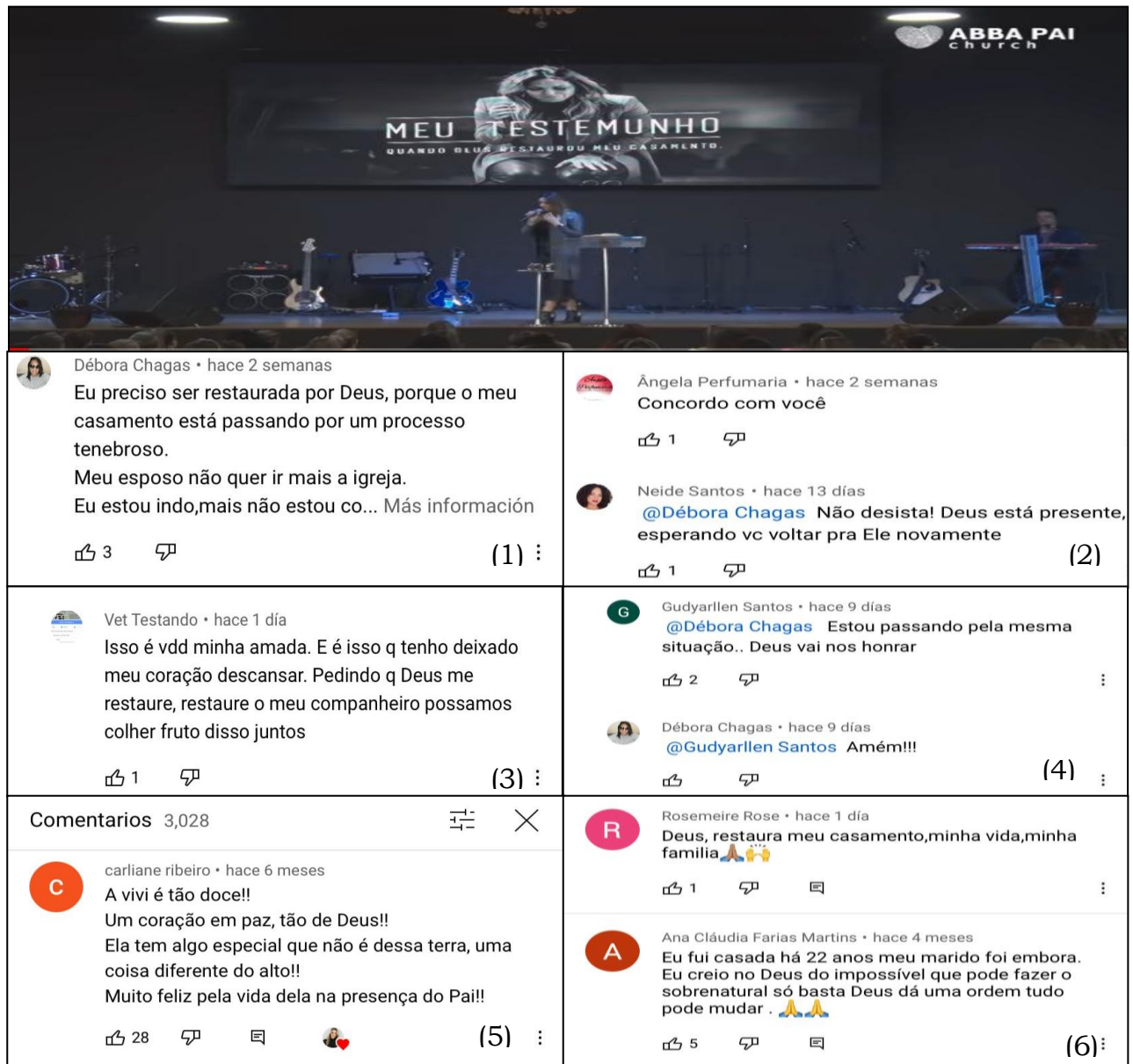

Figura 0-3Figure 3: Screenshots with a frozen image of Pastor Viviane Martinello's sermon on YouTube, as well as screenshots of comments from channel followers in their interactions in the virtual environment with their respective numbers (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 e 6). Fonte

Image (5) demonstrates on a large scale the number of current comments on this YouTube message (more than three thousand comments) and presents the comment of the follower *Carliane* Ribeiro, who emphasizes her affection for Pastor Viviane and how special the spiritual leader is. it is in her life, as the leader ministers with "something different from above!!". It is interesting to note that Pastor *Viviane Martinello* herself liked this message,

demonstrating her attention, interaction and care with the comments elucidated in her message on YouTube. Thus, she presents herself as someone present within the network, not only in posting videos within the channel, but also in the slightly more intimate interaction within her own sermon. As previously explained, it is likely that *Viviane* and *Carliane* never saw each other in person; however, thanks to the technological advances of the digital network, it is possible that both are able to interact and have their interactions recorded in different places and times, a phenomenon possible thanks to the existing possibilities within Cyberspace (SILVA, 2021).

The last image (6) presents the comment of the follower Rosemeire Rose, made a day ago after writing this article. This comment was made in a prayerful tone by the follower, who seems to beg God for the restoration of her marriage, life and family. She emphasizes this intention with the use of two emoticons with hands together and raised upwards, as a sign of being in prayer for the aforementioned themes. Finally, the comment of the follower *Ana Martins* is displayed, who reported in a previous period of 4 months about her family situation. She claims her husband left her after twenty-two years of marriage.

For the aforementioned follower, God is able to put things in order and "everything can change", since God is the one capable of accomplishing the impossible. Their hope and faith is also represented by the use of emoticons with hands together, in a sign of prayer for the given situation. The follower's comment was liked 5 times, bringing the allusion that other people within this cybernetic tangle are also attentive to the situations, regrets, hopes, creeds, praises and compliments expressed by other followers who possibly share the same faith, within a global village that is interconnected by the belief in the sacred (SINGH, 2017; TAN, 2020).

INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND FUTURE NOTES

This article brought with it an increasingly present reality within the field of theology in line with other philosophical, technological and academic

areas of human life: the presence of faith and the sacred within the virtual spectrum. In the preliminary analysis made on comments from the Abba Pai church channel available on YouTube, new fields of future research are unveiled for the analysis of faith and its expression within a new existential locus (SPADARO, 2012; SBARDELOTTO, 2012).

The verb became Bit and today lives within different links, images, pixels and digital media and is shared in increasingly complex audiovisual ways (SBARDELOTTO, 2012; SILVA, 2021). Faced with a pandemic reality that we are still living through, it is clear that the cyberculture pointed out by Pierre Levy (1999) remains strongly rooted within the religious sphere, given the constant cultural metamorphoses experienced contemporaneously. The notion of the global village is found strongly within its common aspect to all the previously elucidated followers: faith in God and in the restoration of a marriage. It is also possible to perceive the concern of the church to be present not only in the stone temples, but in the virtual surroundings present within cyberspace (SILVA, 2021; TAN, 2021)

This academic work is not limited to a mere analysis of comments and expressions reported by followers of a YouTube page. Above all, I bring important considerations about the church of the future in research that may come from these questions: how can the church behave in the face of today's transformations brought about by information overload (PUNTEL, 2010) present in the digital world? How to demonstrate love, dignity and respect for life within cyberspace? How will relations between believers and non-believers take place within a new digital world that is paradoxically complex and diverse in relation to the role of the church a few decades before the advent of the Internet?

These and other possible questions from this academic work demonstrate the importance of the church within the global scenario (LIMA, 2015; TAN, 2021). Additionally, it is clear how relevant this institution is in society, as a stronghold of consolation, mutual support (as seen in the analysis of the comments previously presented), counseling, spiritual support and

mutual sharing of fraternity and Christian affection to an increasingly society. increasingly liquid, heterogeneous and diversified in its way of existing symbiotically both in the online world and in offline life, in addition to the standardized five-inch screen present daily on a cell phone (SILVA, 2021).

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