

EATING THE LAST CANNIBAL: VIOLENCE AND MEMETHINK AS IDEOLOGICAL MAINTENANCE

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Abstract

This work analyzes how violence is discursively legitimized within the intersection of Brazilian evangelical religiosity and Bolsonarist political imaginaries. Examining a viral interview recorded during a pro-Bolsonaro demonstration in São Paulo in 2024, the study mobilizes discourse analysis and the joke of *eating the last cannibal* to interpret how narratives about the Israel– Hamas conflict are reframed as moral self-defense. The findings suggest that religious identification and nationalist symbolism contribute to the normalization of violence within contemporary political discourse.

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Keywords

Ideology. Political violence. Evangelical Christianity.

INTRODUCTION

On February, 25th 2024, a demonstration supporting former president Jair Bolsonaro took place on Paulista Avenue, in São Paulo city, while he was under Federal Police investigation for alleged involvement in draft documents proposing a state of defense at the Superior Electoral Court to alter the outcome of the 2022 elections. Bolsonaro denied the accusation, arguing that a coup would involve tanks, weapons, and a conspiracy—none of which, he claimed, had occurred—and questioning whether a draft decree invoking a constitutional mechanism could be considered evidence of a coup (G1, 2024).

The demonstration mobilized a repertoire of nationalist and religious symbols. Participants displayed Brazilian flags, national football team jerseys, and placards defending the nation and the family while warning against the ‘communist threat’. Israeli flags were also visible among protesters, reflecting diplomatic tensions that followed President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s criticism of Benjamin Netanyahu’s government after Lula described Israel’s actions in Gaza as a genocide and compared them to the Holocaust, a statement that led Israel to declare him *persona non grata* (G1, 2024).

During the event, journalist Joaquim de Carvalho interviewed three women displaying both Brazilian and Israeli symbols¹. One of them justified the Israeli flag by stating that they were ‘Christians like Israel’. When the reporter pointed out that Israel is not a Christian country, she reiterated that the flag represented the group to which she belonged, insisted that she was not a communist, and argued that Israel would stand alongside them, further legitimizing Israel’s military actions in Gaza as responses to ‘terrorist attacks’.

This episode can be interpreted through the joke of *eating the last cannibal*, discussed by Žižek (2024, 2023) and Zupančič (2023). In the anecdote, an explorer asks a tribe whether any cannibals remain and the natives reply that they ate the last one the day before. Žižek (2023) suggests that the emergence

¹ Available at: <https://x.com/joaquimmonstrao/status/1761810499899908325>. Accessed on: April 1st, 2024.

of a ‘civilized’ community depends precisely on this final act—an act that must be erased from memory and transformed into a sacred event—while Zupančič (2023) emphasizes the paradox that those who consumed the last cannibal must nonetheless cease to be cannibals themselves, revealing that every symbolic law depends on a constitutive lack.

Within this logic, moral prohibitions may be resignified through ideological reinterpretation. When Brazilian Christians justify deaths in Gaza as ‘self-defense’ or as a ‘fight against terrorism/communism’, the commandment “Do not murder” (Holman Bible Publishers, 2000, p. 64) is recoded within a framework that transforms violence into an act of courage performed in the name of the nation. As Zupančič (2023) notes, this inversion converts what once appeared as a blunt argument into political discourse marked by pride in having eaten the last cannibal, where morality becomes recoded as audacity in pursuit of the ‘common good’.

Such discursive configurations can be understood through what Monahan and Secaf (2017) describe as memethink: the capacity to intuitively apprehend the contextual meaning of cultural elements in networked environments (Finster, 2018). In this case, the articulation of signs—such as the colors of the Brazilian flag, the Star of David, the finger-gun gesture, and the presence of non-racialized middle-class individuals—produces a shared worldview structured through symbolic association. As symbols circulate across contexts, they accumulate ideological meanings, functioning as recognizable visual condensations of political positions (Finster, 2018; Monahan; Secaf, 2017).

The present study takes as its corpus the interview granted to Carvalho, which circulated widely as a viral video on social media. This methodological choice follows approaches in discourse studies and meme culture research, where viral episodes operate as symbolic condensations that crystallize broader narratives into rapidly circulating forms (Jørgensen; Phillips, 2002; Rose, 2016). Rather than mapping the entire relationship between Brazilian evangelicals and Israel, the analysis examines how fragmented yet widely circulating narratives condense ideological disputes and legitimize political positions. Drawing on theories of ideology, the social imaginary, and visual culture, the study highlights how memethink structures the contemporary conservative imaginary and contributes to the normalization of violence within political discourse.

“We are Christians, just like Israel”

Carvalho’s interview circulated widely as a viral video following the demonstration on Paulista Avenue and can be situated within a broader constellation of memetic artefacts surrounding the *2023–2024 Hamas–Israel Conflict*². Another example from the same period is the Benjamin Netanyahu’s ‘Vampetaço’³. In memetic terms, a viral refers to a single cultural unit capable of spreading rapidly, whereas Shifman (2014) distinguishes between the ‘viral’, ‘creator-based memes’ derived from a specific piece of content, and ‘egalitarian memes’, which circulate in multiple variations structured around a template rather than a single source.

The material analyzed was selected according to three criteria: its rapid circulation in public debate; its media relevance reflected in social media engagement and journalistic coverage; and its symbolic capacity to condense elements of the evangelical-Bolsonarist imaginary linking religion, politics, and violence. The analysis proceeded in three stages: transcription and description of the video’s visual elements (flags, colors, gestures, and bodily expressions); identification of the main discursive axes (the association between Hamas and communism, the legitimization of violence as self-defense, and the framing of bravery as a moral value); and interpretation through theoretical frameworks on the social imaginary, ideology, and memetic logic.

The interview begins with three women dressed in green and yellow, two of whom have their torsos wrapped in the flags of Brazil and Israel. One of them (X) states that they are Christians, just like Israel. When asked whether she knows that the country is not Christian, she replies that Israel represents them and adds that they are neither socialists nor communists. The reporter then questions the second woman (Y), who states that Israel is not terrorist and stands against Hamas. The third (Z) repeats that Israel is not terrorist and opposes Hamas, before X interrupts to add that they are against Hamas, terrorists, and terrorism.

Carvalho then asks whether they are concerned about allegations that Israel has attacked and killed women and children. X replies that Israel is

2 Available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/2023-2024-hamas-israel-conflict>. Accessed on: April 1st, 2024.

3 Available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/benjamin-netanyahus-vampetaco>. Accessed on: April 1st, 2024.

acting in self-defense because it had been attacked first, adding that Hamas captured children, that some were decapitated in front of their parents and others burned in ovens, and that pregnant women and other women—possibly including children—were killed or raped. She concludes that they cannot support such terrorism. When asked whether these claims might be fake news, X suggests that the reporter traveled to the conflict zone and verified the situation himself, while Y advises him to seek ‘information from abroad’ rather than from the Brazilian press. When he asks Y for her name, X advises her not to reveal it, to which Carvalho replies that it is unnecessary since everything has already been recorded on video and thanks them, and Y responds, “you’re welcome”.

The statements of the three women illustrate how reality is experienced as a factual certainty. When confronted with the possibility that their claims might be false, they reaffirm their conviction by inviting the reporter to verify events himself. This suggests that reality does not function here as an objective given but as something constituted through discourse and perceived as true (Silva *et al.*, 2024).

To examine this process, the study conducts a discourse analysis attentive to the visuality that permeates the interview (Jørgensen; Phillips, 2002; Rose, 2016). Following Rose’s (2016) “Discourse Analysis I”, the objective is not to determine the truth or falsity of statements but to analyze how language and images construct narratives about the social world and how these narratives become legitimized within particular regimes of truth.

From this perspective, discourse is productive: it shapes subjects, objects, and the field of what becomes visible or invisible. Visuality itself functions as discourse, since images gain meaning through intertextual relations with other circulating texts and representations. In this context, the depth of Bolsonarist engagement with the Israeli question becomes visible, for example in the presence of Israeli flags at the same event in which the Star of David had been replaced with a pentagram⁴. The following analysis therefore examines how the statements of the three women connect Brazilian evangelical Christianity, Bolsonarism, and the ideological resignification of violence.

⁴ Available at: <https://istoe.com.br/pentagrama-aparece-em-bandeira-de-israel-usada-em-ato-debolsonaro-entenda/>. Accessed on: April 1st, 2024.

The path that leads to Israel

The statements of the three women reveal a broader discursive pattern linking Brazilian evangelical Christianity, Bolsonarism, and support for Israel. Their claim that Israel shares their Christian identity, despite its factual inaccuracy, raises the question of why Brazilian Christians experience strong religious affinity with a distant state. Since the escalation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict in late 2023, different sectors of Brazilian society have pressured the government to adopt a clear pro-Israel position and to condemn Hamas (Martins; Machado; Rocha, 2024)⁵. Within this context, the attacks were interpreted not only as geopolitical events but also as assaults on a territory understood through biblical imagination.

The pro-Jair Bolsonaro demonstration brought together two groups particularly receptive to this framing: Bolsonaro supporters and evangelical Christians (Mori, 2024). Since the 2018 presidential campaign, Israeli flags have increasingly appeared at Bolsonaro’s rallies and right-wing demonstrations (Nemer, 2024), alongside proposals to transfer the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Machado, 2022). This symbolic proximity has puzzled many Brazilians, given the limited diplomatic and economic ties historically linking the two countries. The presence of conservative evangelicals within Bolsonaro’s political coalition further intensifies this paradox, as groups often reluctant to engage with other religions appear to make an exception in relation to Judaism. Understanding this alignment requires examining how Israel is positioned within the imaginaries of Bolsonarists and evangelical Christians.

Within Bolsonarism, the Israeli question is frequently mobilized through a biblical interpretation of territory derived from the *Old Testament*. Bolsonaro himself cultivated this connection, most visibly when he was baptized in the Jordan River while serving as a federal deputy—an event that strengthened his appeal among evangelical voters (Martins; Machado; Rocha, 2024). In this interpretive framework, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is framed as a struggle between good and evil, a narrative that contributes to the normalization of war and to moral justifications for Israeli military actions against Palestinians (Mori, 2024).

5 Commonly understood as a synonym for Palestine.

Bolsonarism nevertheless presents a distinctive configuration within global far-right politics. Despite Bolsonaro's ambiguous relationship with Nazi symbolism and his tolerance of extremist groups, his political trajectory also includes a pronounced rapprochement with Zionism (Gherman, 2022). This linkage allows the Brazilian far-right to symbolically distance itself from accusations of antisemitism while simultaneously mobilizing Israeli imagery within domestic political conflicts. This process produces a form of mutual symbolic reconfiguration in which Bolsonaro appropriates Jewish symbols while segments of the Jewish right align themselves with Bolsonarist agendas, generating what has been described as an 'imaginary Judaism' (Gherman, 2022).

A comparable configuration appears in broader far-right discourse across the Americas, where appeals to a Judeo-Christian Western civilization are often mobilized against communism and perceived cultural decline. In some cases, Israel is even treated as a model state for managing ethnic and religious diversity, a view also present among Bolsonarists (Nemer, 2024). This perspective helps explain the reluctance of Bolsonaro and his supporters to condemn extremist demonstrations and their attempt to reinterpret Nazism and anti-semitism as phenomena associated with the political left (Nemer, 2024).

Evangelical Christians constitute the second key group shaping the pro-Israel discourse visible at the demonstration. Their relationship with Israel draws on multiple symbolic layers, ranging from the millenarian imaginary of the Holy Land to religious tourism and baptism in the Jordan River (Silva *et al.*, 2024). In this context, Palestinian attacks are interpreted as 'terrorist attacks' that symbolically threaten believers in Brazil, while Israel is understood not simply as a political state but as a biblical entity (Martins; Machado; Rocha, 2024; Silva *et al.*, 2024).

Evangelical support for Israel has been explained through several interconnected motivations. These include eschatological interpretations derived from premillennial dispensationalism⁶; biblical promises such as *Genesis 12:3* – "I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Holman Bible Publishers, 2000, p. 9); the belief that Jews remain God's chosen people;

6 One theological premise widely disseminated among evangelicals interprets Israel as an 'end-times clock'. In this view, the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 marks the beginning of a prophetic timeline in which the territory plays a central role in the destiny of Christians (Mori, 2024). At the end of times, God is expected to fulfill the promises made to the Israelites by restoring the reign of David in Jerusalem, from where Christ will rule the world for a thousand years (Machado, 2022).

historical guilt linked to Christian antisemitism culminating in the Holocaust; shared political values that frame Israel as a democratic ally; common geopolitical concerns related to radical Islamism; and a broader conception of a Judeo-Christian Western heritage (Inbari; Bumin, 2024).

Historically, these ideas emerged from transformations within Protestantism following the Reformation and expanded through evangelical movements in the Anglophone world (Inbari; Bumin, 2024). Puritan settlers in North America encouraged the study of Hebrew and developed narratives portraying themselves as heirs to the people of Israel. Evangelicalism later consolidated around doctrines emphasizing personal conversion, biblical authority, and redemption through Christ (Inbari; Bumin, 2024).

Christian Zionism developed from the fusion of dispensationalist theology with the international Zionist movement and expanded particularly in the United States during the twentieth century. In Brazil, these ideas spread through missionary networks and gained political visibility as evangelical groups grew demographically and institutionally. Over time, religious symbolism associated with Israel—including rituals, narratives, and visual motifs—became integrated into neopentecostal practices and political discourse, reinforcing imaginaries of ethno-religious unity and civilizational struggle (Machado, 2022). Such imaginaries are often anchored in biblical passages such as *Psalms* 22, which evoke a sacred relationship with Jerusalem:

I rejoiced with those who said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord”. Our feet were standing within your gates, Jerusalem—Jerusalem, built as a city should be, solidly united, where the tribes, the Lord’s tribes, go up to give thanks to the name of the Lord. (This is an ordinance for Israel.) There, thrones for judgment are placed, thrones of the house of David. Pray for the well-being of Jerusalem: “May those who love you be secure; may there be peace within your walls, security within your fortresses.” Because of my brothers and friends, I will say, “May peace be in you.” Because of the house of the Lord our God, I will pursue your prosperity (Holman Bible Publishers, 2000, p. 543).

The penetration of these symbolic references into Brazilian politics is evident in episodes such as the 2016 impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, when a parliamentarian justified his vote by declaring: “for peace in Jerusalem” (Silva et al., 2024). The episode illustrates how religious narratives, historical imaginaries, and political alignments have intertwined, bringing segments of

Brazilian evangelical society into symbolic proximity with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and aligning this engagement with the broader agenda of the far-right.

Eating the last cannibal

This section examines how the categories of the communist and the terrorist appear in the women's statements as discursive devices that justify Israel's actions in Gaza. Within this framework, the logic of a well-known popular joke – later discussed by Žižek (2024) following Zupančič's (2023) interpretation – functions as a symbolic mechanism that reorganizes moral principles. In the joke, an explorer asks members of an indigenous tribe whether there are still cannibals among them, to which they reply: “No, we're not cannibals; we ate the last one yesterday” (Žižek, 2024, p. 128). The humor of the joke rests on a paradoxical displacement: the act that should prove the absence of cannibalism simultaneously confirms its persistence. Similarly, the women's statements mobilize discursive categories that allow violent practices to be reframed as ethically legitimate, thereby providing a form of unconscious reassurance to the subject.

War has long been perceived as a persistent feature of human relations. Such perceptions have sometimes led to the assumption that conflict is rooted in an innate human impulse to engage in collective struggle or to affirm masculinity (James, 1995), an interpretation that risks naturalizing war and transforming it into a self-confirming prophecy (Fry, 2007). Yet anthropological and sociological studies challenge this view by demonstrating that conflict does not inevitably lead to violence. Human societies possess mechanisms that enable coexistence, prevent aggression, and reestablish peace after episodes of violence (Fry, 2007).

Research on an Australian Aboriginal community (Berndt; Berndt, 1964), for instance, revealed that social groups were fluid rather than fixed. Individuals and families frequently moved between bands, maintaining kinship relations across different groups. These overlapping networks reduced the likelihood of sustained hostility, illustrating how social structures can mitigate conflict (Fry, 2007). Despite such possibilities for peaceful coexistence, violence has historically accompanied social life. Since the beginning of the 21st century, 23 wars have been recorded worldwide, including several episodes linked to the

Israeli–Palestinian conflict⁷. In this sense, violence appears not as an intrinsic human trait but as a phenomenon structured through social and political relations (Han, 2007).

According to Han (2017), violence can be conceptualized as a dynamic organized around polarities—self and other, interior and exterior, friend and enemy—whose historical manifestations include ritualized and public spectacles of violence, ranging from sacrificial practices to contemporary terrorism. Within political discourse, the enemy is constructed through what a community identifies as evil or aesthetically repellent. Žižek (2008a) distinguishes between ‘subjective violence’, which is visible and associated with identifiable agents, and ‘objective violence’, the structural background that sustains what appears to be a peaceful social order. Subjective violence appears as “a perturbation of the ‘normal’, peaceful state of things” (Žižek, 2008a, p. 2), yet understanding such acts requires recognizing the invisible conditions that produce them. This framework reveals how moral evaluations of violence often depend on distance. As Žižek (2008a, p. 43) observes, “shooting someone at point-blank range is, for most of us, far more repulsive than pressing a button that will kill a thousand people we cannot see”.

Following the Hamas attacks in October 2023, segments of the evangelical milieu interpreted the episode not merely as a geopolitical conflict but as an assault against a biblical entity. Within this narrative, the attack was framed as aggression by ‘terrorists’ associated with the ‘left’ against the promise of the ‘promised land’. Consequently, expressions of solidarity with Palestinians were reinterpreted as hostility toward Israel and, by extension, toward evangelical Christians themselves (Silva et al., 2024).

These symbolic connections are sustained through particular readings of biblical narratives such as Genesis 12:3 and Psalms 22. Within such interpretations, attacks against Israel appear as attacks against the divine plan itself. Žižek (2008a) illustrates a similar discursive mechanism through an anecdote from the Iranian Revolution: when confronted with reports of executions, Ayatollah Khomeini reportedly responded that no humans had been killed—only ‘criminal dogs’. The example demonstrates how violence can be linguistically reframed so that its victims are no longer recognized as human subjects.

A comparable operation occurs in narratives that interpret Israeli military actions not as violence against civilians but as legitimate defense against

⁷ Available at: <https://www.helion.co.uk/periods/21st-century.php>. Accessed on: April 1st, 2024.

‘terrorists’ or ‘communists’. In this discursive configuration, the divine authority whose ‘death’ Nietzsche (1974) once proclaimed reappears as a figure invoked to legitimize acts of violence carried out in God’s name. Once actors believe themselves to be executing a divine order, the transgression of moral limits can appear justified (Žižek, 2008a).

Within the Brazilian imaginary, the figure of the ‘law-abiding citizen’ and the ‘Christian’ frequently mobilizes similar arguments to justify violent acts as defensive responses. Narratives circulating in this environment often depict the political left as structurally corrupt while presenting right-wing actors as morally virtuous figures standing outside a corrupt system (Almeida, 2020). In this configuration, violence is interpreted not as aggression but as necessary protection.

The symbolic operation resembles the joke of *eating the last cannibal* (Žižek 2024, 2023; Zupančič, 2023). Acts of killing become reconfigured as foundational gestures that promise the elimination of terrorists or communists and the restoration of moral order—even when such acts entail the death of innocent people. The tension between religious doctrines condemning violence and narratives that justify it can be understood through the functioning of ideology.

For Žižek (2008b), ideology no longer operates through simple ignorance. Rather than Marx’s formulation – “they do not know it, but they are doing it” (Žižek, 2008b, p. 24) – modern ideology functions cynically, according to Sloterdijk’s formulation: “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” (Žižek, 2008b, p. 25). Individuals thus experience what Žižek (2008b) calls an ‘ideological fantasy’, not as a private illusion but as a structure embedded within everyday practice.

Within this configuration, subjects justify ideological positions through appeals to values such as justice, freedom, and community. Yet what sustains ideological commitment is not these proclaimed goals but the paradoxical enjoyment (*jouissance*)⁸ generated by ideological participation itself. As Žižek (2008b, p. 89) notes, subjects derive satisfaction from renunciation, discovering “positive fulfillment in the sacrifice itself, not in its instrumental value”: it is this renunciation, this abandonment of one’s own enjoyment, that produces a certain surplus enjoyment (*plus-de-jouir*).

8 For Lacan (Žižek, 2000), desire is inseparable from pain: its relentless pursuit produces dissatisfaction and suffering. At a certain point, desire becomes so intense that it turns into pain while still yielding pleasure. *Jouissance* designates precisely this pleasure in pain, distinguishing it from ordinary pleasure.

For ideology to function, however, this *jouissance* must remain concealed. The subject must believe that they are acting for a noble cause and that their sacrifices serve a higher purpose (Žižek, 2008b). Only under these conditions can surplus enjoyment emerge. As Winkler explains,

[...] the subject must believe that they are fighting for something and that, as a result, they must renounce pleasure and happiness. Only then does surplus enjoyment emerge. [...] It must appear as if it arises accidentally in the course of pursuing the cause that is ostensibly being sought (Winkler, 2024, p. 65).

This ideological structure contributes to the normalization of violence in everyday life. Reflecting on Arendt's notion of the 'banality of evil', Butler (2011) argues that the banal refers to actions performed routinely and systematically without being adequately named or opposed. Under such conditions, crime becomes ordinary for its perpetrators—carried out without moral repulsion, political indignation, or resistance.

Final remarks

This study examined the discourse of three women interviewed by Carvalho in order to understand how evangelical religiosity intersects with Bolsonarist political imaginaries and how violent acts are discursively reframed so that they appear compatible with Christian moral principles. In this configuration, support for the State of Israel among certain Christian sectors appears to derive less from geopolitical reasoning than from cultural and religious identification (Inbari; Bumin, 2024).

The interviewees invoke narratives of extreme violence—decapitated children, raped women, burned bodies—treated as unquestionable facts even when the possibility of misinformation is raised. Such accounts do not simply describe atrocities but incorporate violence into a moral framework that legitimizes it. This mechanism approximates the 'objective violence', the symbolic order that naturalizes the elimination of the enemy and reflects the logic of cynical ideology (Žižek, 2008b). Within this framework, the claim that Israel is merely defending itself functions as a central justificatory formula and can be interpreted through the joke of *eating the last cannibal* (Žižek, 2023;

Zupančič, 2023). The repetition of statements such as “they are terrorists”, “they are only defending themselves”, and “we do not support Hamas” reveals a normalization of violence similar to the “banality of evil” (Arendt, 1964), in which actions are carried out without moral repulsion (Butler, 2011).

Violence thus appears as part of a broader religious and patriotic common sense, particularly when combined with the Brazilian political imaginary that frames ‘communists’ as enemies both internal and external to the nation. Bolsonarism reactivates this narrative by associating the political left with corruption and social decline, transforming it into a scapegoat for wider societal tensions. In this configuration, ideology is sustained not only by belief but also by enjoyment. Supporting Bolsonaro becomes a way of accessing *jouissance* structured around the identification of an enemy—the communist or the terrorist. The enemy functions as an organizing figure of the conservative religious imaginary: reduced to an object to be eliminated yet indispensable to ideological coherence, its continual construction becomes an end in itself.

Although the present study focuses on a limited corpus—a viral interview and a small set of visual examples—it does not seek to represent the evangelical field or Bolsonarism exhaustively. Rather, it illustrates how narratives of violence and identity condense into communicative episodes that circulate in memetic form. Future research may expand this analysis through digital ethnographies, interviews with religious actors, or comparative studies examining the intersections of religion, politics, and digital culture.

Comendo o último canibal: violência e pensamento-meme como manutenção ideológica

Resumo

Esta pesquisa analisa como a violência é discursivamente legitimada na interseção entre a religiosidade evangélica brasileira e os imaginários políticos do bolsonarismo. A partir da análise de uma entrevista viral gravada durante uma manifestação pró-Bolsonaro em São Paulo, em 2024, o estudo mobiliza a análise do discurso e a piada de “comer o último canibal” para interpretar como narrativas sobre o conflito Israel–Hamas são reenquadradas como auto-defesa moral. Os resultados sugerem que a identificação religiosa e o simbolismo nacionalista contribuem para a normalização da violência no discurso político contemporâneo.

Palavras-chave

Ideologia. Violência política. Cristianismo evangélico.

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