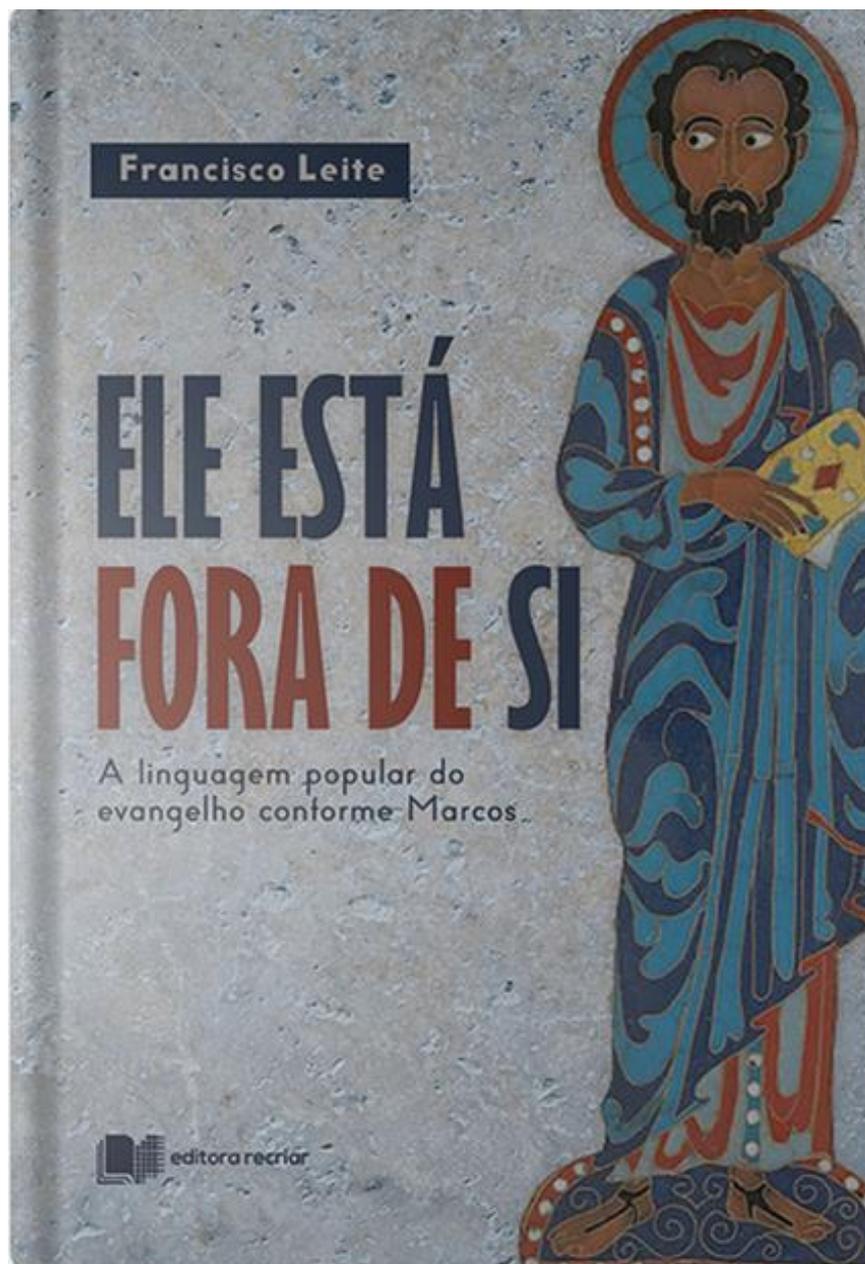REVIEWS

LEITE, Francisco Benedito. *Ele está fora de si.* **A linguagem popular do evangelho conforme Marcos [He's Out of His Mind: The Popular Language of the Gospel of Mark]. São Paulo: Recriar, 2020. 320 p.**

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We want to start our review with a reflection about the moment we are living based on the words of Yuval Noah Harari:

> *Traditional religions* told you that your every word and action was part of some great cosmic plan, and that God watched you every minute and cared about all your thoughts and feelings. *Data religion* now says that your every word and action is part of the great data flow, that the algorithms are constantly watching you and that they care about everything you do and feel. […] For true-believers, to be disconnected from the data flow risks losing the very meaning of life (Harari, 2016, p.342; no italics in original).[1]

No one can deny the importance of Christianity in Western culture: it permeates our lives and has widely informed and imprinted moral and religious behaviors and thoughts. For a long time, Catholic Christianity in Brazil, a heritage of our first colonizers, has drowned out (and still does) other religious views, especially those from Africa, or the ones from the peoples that inhabited the land before the arrival of the Portuguese. Thus, studies such as the ones presented in Francisco Benedito Leite's *Ele está fora de si*: a linguagem popular do evangelho conforme Marcos [*He's Out of his Mind*: The Popular Language of the Gospel of Mark], are, above all, a widening of horizons. The book is a product of the author's doctoral research, done at the University of São Paulo in the Departamento de Letras Clássicas e Vernáculas [Department of Classical and Vernacular Languages] in the area of philology and Portuguese. His doctoral studies, under the supervision of Lineide do Lago Salvador Mosca, finished in 2019. Leite, a profound and meticulous researcher, holds a bachelor's degree in Theology, a master's degree in Religious Sciences and a PhD in Philology and Portuguese. He is also a pastor at the Igreja Presbiteriana Unida [United Presbyterian Church] and an active member of the movement called Resistência Reformada [Reformed Resistance].[2] The great Preface of the book, signed by Lineide Mosca, introduces the study, emphasizes its interdisciplinarity, and invites the reader to reflect on the work and discuss its tenets.

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[1] HARARI, Y. N. *Homo Deus*: A Brief History of Tomorrow. Translated by the author. Oxford: Signal Books, 2016.

[2] Cf. Manifesto da Resistência Reformada [Manifesto of the Reformed Resistance]. Available at: https://resistenciareformada.org/manifesto/Manisfesto.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1tO8HKJDUf6lIXg8oMwkdqxIg H0tFAJjWfV0KmPNSEt7pPc9itRQ2J8Ps. Access on: Feb 23, 2021.

The book's object of study, that is, the gospel of Mark as the author points out, is an *expressive and speaking* object (Bakhtin, 2017, p.59);[3] more than that, it is an *object spoken of* (Amorim, 2009, pp.8-22), frequently and widely spoken of in almost two thousand years of its existence. To understand it, Leite selects part of the collective memory of the object, the ways it was spoken of before him in different space and time contexts. He seeks the "*immediate social situation and the broader social milieu*" (Vološinov, 1986, p.86, italics in original;[4] also see Medvedev/Bakhtin, 1991, p.72)[5] in numerous texts. In fact, as Leite states in the introductory Esclarecimentos [Explanation], the work is a rich interdisciplinary study in the area of Religious Studies:

> If Religious Studies is the name we give to the set of knowledge that we use to access the elusive object of Religion in its determined sources, be them Language Sciences, Philosophy, Social Sciences, Psychology, Historiography, Theology or other human sciences, this means that each of these areas of knowledge includes research about the religious object as long as the interdisciplinary approach is maintained (Leite, 2020, p.14; our translation).[6] [7]

In this introduction, Leite also raises the issue of the frequent search for new ways to understand the religious phenomenon and highlights the development of studies of literary sources in Language Sciences, especially by means of discourse theories, seen as possible substitutes for the heuristic philological science with its positivist basis, and biblical theology. He then invites readers to do a reading of Mark that is not "dogmatic nor reductionist; a reading that sees the symbolic subversion of the gospel expressed

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[3] TN. The excerpt of the essay "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences" is not found in the English version. In fact, in the Portuguese version there are five pages prior to the beginning of the essay in the English version. Cf. Bakhtin, M. Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences. In: Bakhtin, M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986a. pp.159-172.

[4] VOLOŠINOV, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

[5] BAKHTIN, M. M./MEDVEDEV, P. N. *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics. Translated by Albert J. Wehrle. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

[6] TN. The quotations of books that have not been published in English will be translated into English by the translator of the article.

[7] Text in original: "Se chamarmos de Ciências da Religião o conjunto de saberes úteis para a realização do acesso ao objeto fugidio da Religião em suas determinadas fontes, sejam as Ciências da Linguagem, a Filosofia, as Ciências Sociais, a Psicologia, a Historiografia, a Teologia ou outras ciências humanas, isso significa que cada uma dessas áreas do conhecimento comporta pesquisas sobre o objeto religioso, desde que se mantenha o procedimento interdisciplinar."

especially by the symbolism of the Bakhtinian carnival" (p.15).[8] This invitation certainly motivates the reader – especially if s/he is "Bakhtinian" – to continue reading the research.

After the introductory Esclarecimentos [Explanation], there are four chapters, namely, O texto como realidade imediata. A plausibilidade do discurso religioso a partir da filosofia das formas simbólicas [The Text as Unmediated Reality. The Plausibility of Religious Discourse Based on the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms]; A teologia bíblica em colapso. Os procedimentos histórico-filológicos da exegese histórico-crítica e o estudo dos evangelhos [The Collapsing Biblical Theology. The Historical-Philological Procedures for the Historical-Critical Exegesis and the Study of Mark]; A linguagem popular de Marcos. O Evangelho na fissura dos gêneros retóricos e poéticos [Popular Language in Mark. The Gospel in the Chasm of Rhetorical and Poetic Genres]; O Evangelho como discurso religioso. Estudo de Marcos 3.20-45 [The Gospel as Religious Discourse. The Study of Mark 3:20-45], and the epilogue. These titles show that this book is not about proving a religious discourse; it rather questions its "plausibility" (not its "truth") and points to the collapse of traditional biblical theology and its difficult approximation of rhetorical and poetic genres. Through language, it mainly brings the gospel of Mark close to the Bakhtinian concept of carnivalization, which is very intriguing to a lay reader.

In the first chapter, titled O texto como realidade imediata. A plausibilidade do discurso religioso a partir da filosofia das formas simbólicas [The Text as Unmediated Reality. The Plausibility of Religious Discourse Based on the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms], Leite seeks to make explicit the Bakhtinian expression used in the title – "the text as unmediated reality" (Bakhtin, 1986b, p.103).[9] Leite declares that "the text is the limit to which one can reach, despite any reality it represents" (p.27).[10]

In fact, opposing the positivist heritage that conceives of religious discourse as a "representation of reality overcome by the advent of Science" (p.25),[11] Leite argues that the biblical text – or the religious discourse – presents "a plausible construction of the

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[8] Text in original: "dogmática de Marcos e não reducionista, que enxerga a subversão simbólica do evangelho expressa, sobretudo, pelo simbolismo do carnaval bakhtiniano."

[9] BAKHTIN, M. The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986b. pp.103-131.

[10] Text in original: "o texto é o limite até ao qual se pode chegar, apesar de qualquer realidade que represente."

[11] Text in original: "representação da realidade superada pelo advento da Ciência."

world," attested in texts that quote texts – in Bakhtin's words, "words about words, texts about texts" (1986b, p.103).[12] This is due to the fact that he does not understand the "intertextuality" between the different texts with which the biblical text dialogues as something that occurs in specific concrete historical situations, for he argues that even the "historical" texts, which expose these concrete situations, are only "texts" that are subject to readings and interpretations.[13] In my opinion, this is the understanding that justifies that fact that the notion of "dialogue" between texts or the notion of "voices" is little used. This is most likely the reason why – this is my understanding – his concept of text is based on Kristeva's and Todorov's readings of Bakhtin, which leads him to use the notion of intertextuality. The then states that "the 'text' – and not the historical and social institutions embedded in it – is the object of our reflection, for they provide us only with other representations and we can only understand them based on what the text itself informs us" (p.86).[14]

This is a dense chapter, which anchors the author's research in Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of the symbolic forms, especially in the sense that myth, language, religion, art, and science are seen as symbolic forms through which human beings create reality in different ways (p.32). He then shows what constitutes – as he sees it – the relationship between symbolic forms and discourse theories, leading him to literature and language theorists, such as German philologist Erich Auerbach, Canadian Northrop Frye, the Bakhtin Circle, and the new rhetorics. He thus proposes a definition of religious discourse based on this relationship:

> We then propose that religious discourse is a representation of the autonomous and antinomic reality that emerges from the capacity to use symbols, which is inherent and particular to human beings. It manifests through discursive communication between people and social groups and can only be understood and explored based on its formal content, as its 'logic' – so to say as it is a type of language although different

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[12] For reference, see footnote 9.

[13] Leite's critique to another work that analyzes one of the gospels based on Bakhtinian concepts makes this understanding very clear: "The problem is that it allows the understanding that what is narrated in the text actually happened in concrete reality, thus conferring on the referred voices historical elements and not textual institutions" (2019, p.256). Text in original: "O problema é que dá a entender que o que está narrado no texto realmente aconteceu na realidade concreta e então atribui as referidas vozes a elementos históricos e não às instituições textuais."

[14] Text in original: "o 'texto' é o objeto de nossa reflexão, não as instituições histórico-sociais que o envolveram, pois delas temos apenas outras representações e só podemos compreendê-las a partir daquilo que o próprio texto nos informa."

from the scientific and mathematical logic – is absurd, because it establishes close – and sometimes identical – relations to myths. It aims to deal with the reality that refers to the ever-absent object called "God" by Western Judeo-Christian tradition (although it is called differently in other traditions) and its interaction with humanity (p.84).[15]

The second chapter critically approaches that which Leite understands as the "collapsing biblical theology" and the historical and philological procedures of the historical-critical exegesis of the Gospels. He thus recovers the methodology of these studies as well as the historicist perspective of the German Liberal Theology. He then criticizes not only engaged perspectives that interfere in advance in research results, but also endogenous definitions, such as canon and revelation, and the positivist views of biblical theology that existed until the first half of the 20th century and that were collapsing. He argues that the reconstruction of the plausibility of religious discourse should be established "according to the tenets of language sciences so that satisfactory answers can be given to our world" (p.168).[16]

The heart of the work is actually chapters three and four. In the third chapter, which approaches the popular language of Mark – based especially on Auerbach, Frye and Bakhtin –, Leite goes back to the idea that the gospel is not a "historical description of Jesus, but, apart from it, it is a theological construction of the life of Jesus" (p.169).[17] At the same time he shows its role in legitimizing the identities of the first Christians, who were contemporary to the narrator of the gospel and lived after Jesus died. Based on Auerbach, Leite shows how cultured men of the ancient world found the gospel odd due to its low style and its "aesthetic, structural and argumentative problems (…), which were unacceptable to men of good literary taste and cultured men in general" (p.182).[18] To the

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[15] Text in original: "Propomos então que o discurso religioso é uma representação da realidade autônoma e antinômica advinda da capacidade de simbolizar que é inerente e particular ao ser humano. Sua manifestação se dá através da comunicação discursiva entre indivíduos e grupos sociais e só pode ser compreendida e explorada a partir de seu próprio conteúdo formal, pois sua 'lógica' – por assim dizer, já que se trata de uma espécie de linguagem, embora não seja a lógica científico-matemática – é absurda porque tem relações muito aproximadas e, às vezes, idênticas às do mito. Seu objetivo é tratar da realidade que se refere ao objeto sempre ausente chamado pela tradição judaico-cristã ocidental 'Deus' (embora em outras tradições receba outros nomes), e de sua interação com a humanidade."

[16] Text in original: "conforme os estatutos das ciências da Linguagem, para que assim se ofereçam respostas satisfatórias para o nosso mundo."

[17] Text in original: "descrição histórica da vida de Jesus, mas, diferentemente disso, é uma construção teológica da vida de Jesus."

[18] Text in original: "problemas estéticos, estruturais e argumentativos (...), inaceitáveis aos homens de bom gosto literário e também aos letrados de um modo geral."

Greco-Roman culture, the Semitic worldview found in the gospel sounded implausible. Based on Frye, Leite highlights the contribution of oral tradition to the structure of the gospels (p.187).

To prove the use of popular and carnivalized language in the Gospel of Mark, Leite uses different passages from Bakhtin's work to focus on carnivalization in literature, such as the "scene of coronation-dethronement of the 'king of the Jews' in the canonic gospels" (p.190)[19] in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Bakhtin, 1984a, p.135);[20] he uses passages also from the essays Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel (1981a)[21] and From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse (1981b),[22] and the book *Rabelais and his World* (1984b).[23] He then shows how cultured men of the ancient world would "laugh" at the gospel of Mark, for they considered the composition of the gospel "ridiculous, confusing, repulsive" especially due to its heteroglossia: "vocabulary and syntax sounded unfit, vulgar and riddled with Hebrewisms" (p.191).[24] Besides, he highlights the contradictions between the "sublime and humble elements in Christ" (among other examples, he shows, on pages 200-201, how the triumphal entry of Jesus in Jerusalem, sitting on a young donkey, parodies the narrative of the triumph of the Divine Augustus). He also points to how "the after death inverts the social status of earthly life" (p.211)[25] and concludes that the gospel would be "a 'salad' of poorly organized genres, sometimes presenting narrative texts, sometimes presenting first-person discourses, which, after all, clearly aims to unveil the pedantry of religious hypocrites through an ironic narrative" (p.213).[26] To sum it up, he lists the following characteristics of carnivalization in the gospel of Mark:

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[19] Text in original: "a cena de coração-destronamento do 'rei dos judeus' dos evangelhos canônicos."

[20] BAKHTIN, M. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson; introduction by Wayne C. Booth. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984a.

[21] BAKHTIN, M. Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics. *In*: BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination*: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981a. pp.84-258.

[22] BAKHTIN, M. From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse. *In*: BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination*: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981b. pp.41-83.

[23] BAKHTIN, M. Rabelais and His World. Translated by Helene Iswolsy. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984b.

[24] Text in original: "vocabulário e a sintaxe pareciam ineptos, vulgares e eivados de hebraísmos."

[25] Text in original: "o pós-morte inverte o status social da vida terrena."

[26] Text in original: "uma 'salada' de gêneros pobremente organizados, ora apresentando textos narrativos ora apresentando discursos em primeira pessoa, que, em todo caso, têm o claro objetivo de desmascarar o pedantismo dos religiosos hipócritas através de uma narrativa irônica."

> the inferiority of the genre, the inferiority of the hero and the other characters, the genre's association with the marginalized, the paratactic syntax, the unfinishedness, the laughter, the diversity of languages and voices, the heteroglossia, the heavily rhetorical (oral) element, the distance between language and reality, the manifestation of the death of old national myths, the parody, the irony, the ambivalence and ambiguity, and the indirect word… (p.233).[27]

In the fourth chapter, titled O Evangelho como discurso religioso. Estudo de Marcos 3.20-45 [The Gospel as Religious Discourse. The Study of Mark 3:20-45], Leite analyzes a passage through which he shows these elements in the material text, which, according to him, express the "carnivalized folklore, the old worldview of the myth, which gives human beings the suspension of daily existential oppressions" (p.245).[28] Leite starts with the aforementioned theoretical tenets of Auerbah, Bakhtin, Frye, and the new rhetorics, combined with narratology, and pays close attention to dialogue, formalism, the absurd logic, and the Magical Word as he analyzes the selected passage, which he translates directly from the Greek language. At least to lay people, his study presents new facets through which we can perceive the old discourses of the gospel, known by many in our Western Christian civilization. It is a voice among the plurality of voices of praise and insult heard in the text. It is found in the first part of the title of the book, namely, "He's Out of His Mind." In this vein, it is worth commenting on the cover of the book, whose graphical design is signed by Sarah Furtado. The picture portrayed in the cover reminds readers of the Byzantine style and promotes a dialogue with Christ Pantocrator[29] – the Almighty usually found in the Greek New Testament. The image avoids a rigid posture, a neutral countenance, or a communion with God. It is mainly its look from the side, somewhat frightened, that makes it expressive and funny, leading to laughter. Coherent with the book, the image carnivalizes the old icon.

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[27] Text in original: "a baixeza do gênero, a baixeza do herói e dos demais personagens, a associação do gênero aos marginalizados, a sintaxe paratática, a inconclusibilidade, o riso, o plurilinguismo, a heterovocidade, a heteroglossia, o elemento fortemente retórico (oral), o distanciamento entre língua e realidade, a manifestação da morte dos antigos mitos nacionais, a paródia, a ironia, a ambivalência e a ambiguidade e a palavra indireta."

[28] Text in original: "folclore carnavalesco, a antiga visão de mundo do mito, a qual dá ao homem a suspensão de suas opressões existenciais cotidianas."

[29] Cf. https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pantocrator. Access on Feb. 20,2021.

In the epilogue, Leite briefly summarizes the trajectory of the book and makes his thesis clear: the popular language of the *Gospel of Mark*, a textual materialization of a religious discourse, shows the symbolic resistance of the first Christians, the majority of whom belonged to the lower and needy strata of society and were rejected by their own families, cultured and educated classes, and official religious institutions.

Without a doubt, in terms of symbols and religion, this study adds valuable data for us to understand our contemporary world, possibly providing us with new answers. Going back to Harari, we can state that the omnipresent *data religion* that surrounds us has been amplified with this knowledge, which is not necessarily limited to the academic sphere. We thus invite readers to reflect, debate and argue on these data.

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