

Building the human rights religion: United Nations discourse on climate change

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ABSTRACT: This article studies how the normative paradigm of human rights is being constructed based on the United Nations discourse on climate change, one of the most pressing global problems of today. This paradigm is conceptualized as religion and emphasis is placed on two constructive modes: the discursive mobilization of myths, aimed at sacralizing elements of the religion of rights; and how it competes symbolically with civil religion (Rousseau). To this end, a narrative analysis of a corpus of oral interventions by the Secretary-General in the first four months of 2023 was carried out. As a result, this discourse conveys the myth of the biblical Exodus, updated in a climatic exodus, which sacralizes the UN; and that, despite an apparent critique of state-centric power structures, the religion of rights is subordinated to civil religion, which raises doubts about its construction.

KEYWORDS: Religion; Mythology; Human rights; Climate change; Linguistic research.

Construyendo la religión de derechos humanos: discurso de Naciones Unidas sobre cambio climático

RESUMEN: El presente artículo estudia cómo se está construyendo el paradigma normativo de los derechos humanos con base en el discurso de Naciones Unidas sobre el cambio climático, uno de los problemas globales más acuciantes de la actualidad. Se conceptualiza este paradigma como religión y se hace énfasis en dos modos constructivos: la movilización discursiva de mitos, orientados a sacralizar elementos de la religión de derechos; y cómo ésta compite simbólicamente con la religión civil (Rousseau). Para ello, se realizó un análisis narrativo de un corpus de intervenciones orales del secretario general en el primer cuatrimestre de 2023. Como resultado este discurso vehiculiza el mito del Éxodo bíblico, actualizado en un Éxodo climático, lo cual sacraliza a la ONU; y que, pese a una aparente crítica a estructuras de poder estadocéntricas, la religión de derechos se muestra subordinada a la religión civil, cosa que plantea dudas acerca de su construcción.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Religión; mitología; derechos humanos; cambio climático; investigación lingüística.

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Introduction

For approximately half a century, human rights have acquired an unprecedented normative role in the history of humanity (Moyn, 2010). For the first time, people and nations agreed on a common value framework (with some exceptions) to guide social coexistence of every country and to a global level. Global crisis of the XXI century (pandemic, climate change, international migration, nuclear war threat, etc.) shows the need of having a common value framework which frame social conflict and guide public policies. Nonetheless, the full compliance of human rights is far from reality (General Assembly [GA], 2023), which raises the question of why.

One approach to this question considers the development and competition among normative systems, understanding them as ideologies, utopias or religions (Berger and Luckmann, 2012; Gramsci, 2000; Mannheim, 2004). The process of formation and consolidation of a moral paradigm must be understood in order to decipher what hinders its fulfillment. Adopting the analytical framework of religion, in this study it was examined the discursive construction of the emerging human rights religion (Malachuk, 2010). Specifically, the discourse of the United Nations (UN) was investigated, in the words of its leader, Secretary-General António Guterres, on climate change. This phenomenon constitutes one of the main global problems currently motivating the discourse of rights by moral elites. The question is: how is the human rights religion discursively constructed in relation to climate change? This question can be divided into other two. Question one: what other religions does the human rights religion compete with, and how? Question two: what discursive processes, and in what ways, contribute to sacralizing elements of the human rights paradigm?

Regarding the first question, the struggle with civil religion (Rousseau, 1997), a broad and deeply consolidated religion in modernity and to this day will be discussed in this article. Paradoxically, the interstate impulse —by the UN— to create, grow and spread the rights religion undermines the power of the state; which in turn, resists respecting, promoting, protecting and guaranteeing them.

In relation to the second question, there is an interest in the speech transmission of sacralizing myths. After the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change has gained global

notoriety with the publication of the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which warns that “The choices and actions [on climate change] implemented in this decade will have impacts now and for thousands of years” (IPCC, 2023, p. 24). Precisely, there has been criticism of the alarmism that this type of official announcements seems to convey, which are attributed to a mobilization of the Apocalypse myth (Ivic, 2023). Given this accusation, it was inquired into what myth is structured the discourse of the UN Secretary-General about climate change and, therefore, how this mythical articulation constructs the human rights religion.

This work is based on the field of sociocultural studies focused on language (Brown, 2002), within the framework of a conception of culture as a symbolic universe (Keesing, 2010). It is interested in the sociocultural construction of environmental problems with a global perspective (Cubillos-Quintero, 2015; Martínez, 2022), although without understanding it as a tool or solution for sustainable development; instead, it approaches the symbolization of the large global problem —climate change— with an ulterior effect (warned or not): to position and promote a global religiosity, that of human rights. In line with the analysis of Hernández (2020), it contributes to the understanding of the social construction of such rights as the first universal Transcendent.

This article begins with the theoretical framework, followed by the literature review on climate change discourse. Next, the research method is detailed, and the results are presented and discussed, and finish with a conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

Although the theory of modern secularization has been discredited for the Eurocentrism, based on a substantivism notion of religion, the postulate of functional differentiation of society has been retained, which implies a progressive decentering and fragmentation of the metanarratives —in particular, religions— that in the past bound pre-modern societies together (Garzón, 2014). However, this social complexification does not involve, as this theory had expected, a religious decadence. On the contrary, the religious phenomenon becomes free from conceptual and institutional ties and can colonize the other social spheres, although manifesting itself in an apparently non-religious manner, if religion is

understood in the traditional sense of institutionalized belief in supernatural entities. Therefore, there is a diversification of beliefs and religious institutional forms (Beriaïn, 2014), understanding religion as the social construction of the transcendent (Compte, 2022). Often studied as “secular religions” (Vliegenthart, 2020), they attach the supernatural transcendent to deeply rooted sacralizations in the empirical experience, as a way of “immanent transcendence” (Carretero, 2009).

In the European political field, which will impose its vision on other continents, numerous thinkers collaborate in this transubstantiation of politics into religion, assigning formerly divine attributes to the modern State. The reason of State of Machiavelli, the Hobbesian Leviathan, the social contract of Rousseau, the Revolution of Robespierre, the Hegelian State, the dictatorship of the proletariat of Marx, or the National Socialism of Hitler, among other examples, support the *dictum* of Schmitt about a modern transfer of the sacred to institutional politics (Schmitt, 2009).

This sacralization of the State has been called civil religion, after the neologism coined by Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (1997). The Genevan affirms that “it matters very much to the community that each citizen should have a religion that makes him love his duty” (p. 130) before the State. The French Revolution and nineteenth-century nationalism will facilitate the incarnation, still in force today, of this Rousseauian intellectual intuition. Despite its rational, neutral and secular facade, the State evidences in multiple ways its religious nature (military *ethos*, nationalism, civic education, etc.) and, as an Absolute entity, it faces any internal or external threat that may violate its integrity or interests in accordance with the principle of being the end of itself, especially ideologies or religions that undermine its sacred authority (Compte, 2021).

In 2023, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) turned 75 years old, even though it was only until the end of the 20th century that it emerged as a moral paradigm of humanity, filling the void left by the failure of historical socialism and popular discontent with the (neo)liberal State (Moyn, 2010; Stith, 2010). In recent decades these rights have been sacralized, at least in Western societies, shaping a “secular religion of humanity” (Féron, 2014; Fitzpatrick, 2007; Gutwirth and De Hert, 2021; Malachuk, 2010; Stith, 2010) or “global civil religion” (Cole, 2012; Owen, 2005). Based on the “faith” of “the

peoples of the United Nations” (UDHR, Preamble) and with the UDHR and the treaties derived from it as sacred texts (Elliott, 2007; Cole, 2012), this religion preaches the sanctity of the individual and the “human family” (UDHR, Preamble; Reinbold, 2017), in addition to exalting collectives (e.g., “people,” “indigenous people”) and vulnerable groups (children, women, etc.). It aims at individual and State “conversion” (Lefebvre, 2013; Reinbold, 2017), an aspiration that has partly given results (Cole, 2012), feeding back the faith of its devotees.

Such a sudden success, due in large part to the States, implies a conflict with civil religion. This was conceived by Rousseau to ensure the moral supremacy of the State, subjugating the other religions, as has occurred without major problem until the arrival of this first religion of humanity. In terms of Mannheim (2004), the ideology of the State now faces a utopia that challenges it; and a confrontation between symbolic universes can be observed, currently favoring the hegemonic religious power.

This dispute begins with the moral watershed that reverses the direction of legitimization between State and rights; originally, these emanated from the former, but in the new religion they legitimize it (Elliott, 2007, p. 359; Moyn, 2010); in other words, the rights sacralization has ousted other pre-existing ones (Fitzpatrick, 2007). As “dogmas”, human rights fight against “cultural, religious or other types of beliefs” (Gago, 2001, p. 326); they conflict with other religions (Ferón, 2014), particularly civil religion. This implies converting the State into the rights religion, an effort that is opposed by political practices with an alien logic, framed in the reason of State (Gago, 2001; Gutwirth and De Hert, 2021).

Among the forms of social construction of a religion —its hieropoiesis or morphogenesis—, the discursive form based on language highlights for contributing directly and substantively to the elaboration of the symbolic universe focused on a specific sacralization, in this case human rights. The rights discourse competes with the civil religion discourse (and those of other religions and social processes in general) in the social construction of reality, positioning and mobilizing its values in semiotic formulas, commonly linguistic, against those of the latter. Therefore, there is the hypothesis that the UN discourse on climate change reveals the clash between these two religions and, at the

same time, the subordination of rights to the State, because civil religion continues to dominate over the others.

Nevertheless, beyond the discursive confrontation with the State, the religion of human rights must construct its own identitarian and sacralizing narratives. A basic discursive process of sacralization that concerns the myth. Myth is a cultural cognitive-affective model that consists of a narrative matrix that summarizes how social reality is and should be. It models values to archetypal characters, which unfold in an existential plot (Frye, 1982); hence, it exemplifies (what a culture considers to be) a universal human experience. Myths elude empirical testing as axiomatic beliefs about the world and express self-evident, natural and normal truths for their believers (Barthes, 1972).

Myths constitute grammars that organize symbolic universes. They are not exclusive to one or another religion, but are shared, and each religion nuances them in its own way. The history of a myth consists of copious adoptions and socio-cultural adaptations (Carretero, 2006). Christianity updates the myth of the Jewish messiah in the figure of Jesus, turning him into Jesus Christ. Civil religion incorporates Judeo-Christian myths and from other origins (e.g. Greek, Oriental) to integrate itself; for instance, the myth of obedience to God —to the divine will— in exchange for promises and benefits is turned into the idea of a docile citizenship before the paternalistic and beneficent State. Lastly, religions renew myths in order to create their Transcendents; this reminiscence of previous myths can be called *mitoanamnesis* (using the Greek word for reminiscence). Hypothetically (H₂), the UN discourse on climate change configures or articulates myths that support the human rights religion.

Methodology

To explore how the human rights religion is discursively constructed in relation to climate change, a case study consisting of a discourse analysis of a selection of public speeches by the UN Secretary-General, leader of the founding body and the highest promoter of human rights, was performed. The corpus is composed of speeches transcripts that appear on the UN Speeches on Climate Action website (<https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/speeches>). This study has been limited to the 16

speeches of the Secretary-General between January and April 2023, due to the publication of the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report at the beginning of that year, which warns of an imminent climate collapse. The texts are in English and have been analyzed in this language, without translation into Spanish. The audiences of these speeches correspond to the elites of civil religion, i.e., State leaders and leaders of the private sector.

Discourse analysis is a method with many derivatives (Gee and Handford, 2012). The focus has been placed on narrative analysis, the best suited approach for examining the presence of myths (or stories, in general) in discourse (Clandinin, 2007). Specifically, the cultural narratology perspective focuses on discerning the vehiculation of underlying stories in discourse, based on the assumption that the most influential stories-typically, myths-constitute the narrative communities (Müller-Funk, cited in Herman and Vervaeck, 2019).

Based on this methodological framework, the present analysis considers two complementary dimensions: mythic structure and discursive strategies (Table 1). The mythic structure theory (Schechter, 2005) and the dynamic approach to narrative research (Daiute, 2014) disaggregate myth/narrative into five analytical facets: characters, values, plot, temporality and significance. These dimensions correspond to a series of discursive strategies that the sender employs to modulate his message according to his purposes (Wodak, 2001). The identification of relevant strategies occurs during the analysis of the corpus, and not before; they have been indicated in Table 1 after the colon.

Table 1. Model to analyze the climate exodus myth.

<i>Dimensions of the myth</i> <i>(Schechter, 2005; Daiute, 2014).</i>	<i>Discursive strategies</i> <i>(Wodak, 2001).</i>
<i>Characters</i>	Naming: adjectives and other intensifiers.
<i>Values</i>	Argumentation: authority mole
<i>Plot</i>	Statement: subjects "I" and "we".
<i>Temporality</i>	Intensification: time deictics and other markers of temporality
<i>Meaning</i>	Naming: metaphors

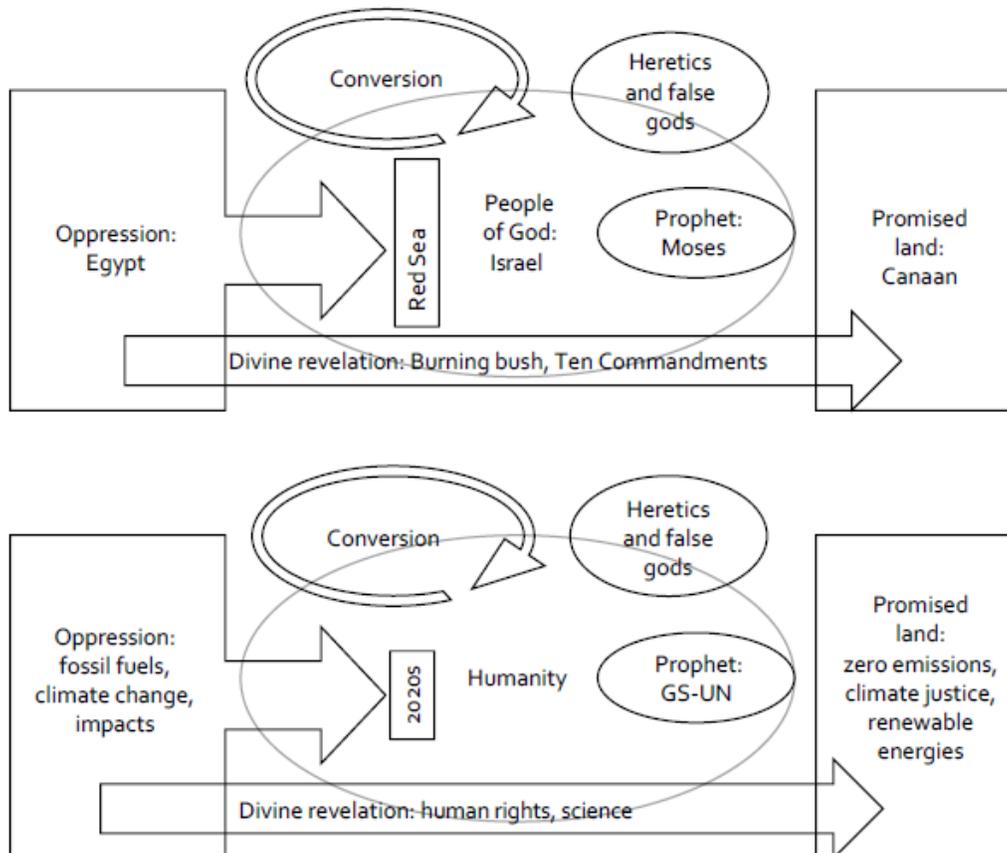
Source: Preparation by the author.

Results

The discourse analysis of the corpus of the Secretary-General's speeches shows the underlying presence of the biblical Exodus myth in the configuration of the official message of the UN on climate change. The form of the original mythical story is preserved, and, at the same time, the myth is updated with content specific to this issue (Figure 1).

The biblical Exodus tells how God, through Moses, frees his people, Israel, from slavery in Egypt in order to make himself known to them, particularly with the Ten Commandments, and lead them to the Promised Land of Canaan. In the same way, the humanity in the climate exodus, through the UN, and particularly its Secretary-General, frees itself from the slavery of fossil fuels to know itself better, deepening human rights and science, and heading for the Promised Land of climate justice and renewable energies.

Figure 1. The myth of the biblical Exodus and its update in the discourse of the UN Secretary-General.



Source: Preparation by the author.

Another myth lies in the Exodus, that of the prophet, whose function, besides leading the transition at the objective —observable— level, is to purify it at the subjective level. On one hand, Moses/the Secretary-General calls for the conversion of Israel/humanity, an indispensable transformation necessary for real advancement, not only in appearance, towards the Promised Land; in the religious perspective, faith must be the basis for behavior (Jerusalem Bible, 1998, Isa. 29:13). On the other hand, this claim implies discerning those who oppose the divine/human will for the purpose of denouncing them and, consequently, to repudiate the false gods that they support. In summary, in order to reach God in the Promised Land, one must return to God, through continuous conversion; and the prophet leads both sides.

It should be noted that the Exodus and Moses, like all effective myths, are projected into the future, being replicated in the New Testament, specifically in the Gospel and Jesus Christ, respectively (Frye, 1982; Biblia de Jerusalem, 1998, Mt. 17:1-8). The Hebrew version has been chosen, since it is understood that its greater narrative literalness facilitates its assimilation to contemporary discourses, although this is a relatively arbitrary decision; one could start from the Gospel-Christ myth.

Next, this article will delve into the way in which the Secretary-General's speech evidences this dual mythical structure -Exodus-prophet- in three dimensions: foundation, journey and moral leadership.

The basis: Human revelation

The myth of the biblical Exodus is socially established with the development of the collective *belief* in a revelation of divinity on the human-historical plane. This implies the progressive definition and acceptance by the Hebrew community of a canon of texts that gather such revelation and of elements derived from or linked to it. In this sense, the expression of the divine will is not limited to certain moments of supernatural intervention (the burning bush, the Ten Commandments); it is communicated mainly through discrete daily manifestations, product of attentive listening to the sacred corpus and authorized interpretations, participation in the liturgy and in prayer (Frye, 1982).

The speech of the Secretary-General mirrors these approaches. Its basis, as could not be otherwise, coming from the leader of the UN, is human rights. They constitute the historical revelation, equivalent to the Ten Commandments, which institutes the global social contract of humanity with itself, thereby sacralizing itself as Humanity and the object of worship of the human rights religion. Human rights, like Marxism for Bloch (1995), recapitulate religious history and establish the existential plenitude that guides humanity:

“Human rights (...) are the solution to many of the world’s other problems. From the climate emergency to the misuse of technology, the answers to today’s crises are found in human rights. Human rights are innate to being human. The Hindu Vedas, the Ancient Chinese Analects of Confucius, the Bible and the Koran all set out very similar duties and rights” (F27¹).

His starting point is the UDHR, the founding text of the increasing body of international agreements on rights that are becoming established as a sacred canon. Therefore, in line with Judeo-Christian biblicism, the Secretary General emphasizes that “We must revitalize the Universal Declaration and ensure its full implementation to face the new challenges of today and tomorrow” (F27).

Among the recent rights resulting from this exegesis of the pre-existing canon to new realities is “the right to a clean, healthy, sustainable environment” (F6, citing GA, 2022). This right sustains and legitimizes the framing of climate change as a global problem and the leadership of the UN in this regard. In addition, this enablement is reflected in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13, titled “Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”, which, along with sixteen other SDGs, since 2015 articulates the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” (GA, 2015). The General-Secretary contextualizes the fight against climate change in the agenda “Because SDG progress (...) is about renewable energy and clean air. It is about a world in which everyone enjoys human rights and human dignity” (A25S).

The corpus examined in this article belongs to the network of reflections coming from the rights doctrine, which, although not canonical, establish and project the authority of expert

¹ Each statement is cited with a code [first letter of the month, from January to April][day][if applicable, marker to differentiate statements on the same day].

and authorized individuals and institutions (Bourdieu, 2008) in the 'theology' of rights. Among such organizations, the UN stands out as being born to reveal and promote them; and who more authorized than its head, the Secretary-General? Like the highest pontiff of the church of human rights, the Secretary-General challenges state leaders with the force of the morality of rights to mobilize the global transition from the fossil to the renewable economy: "The road ahead is steep. Today's [SDG] report shows us just how steep. But it is one we can and must travel – together – for the people we serve" (A25S).

That being said, while human rights provide the primary interpretive scheme for understanding and solving climate change, it has not been revealed by them, but by another source of human revelation: the science. Prior to the rights paradigm, science represents the modern epistemological triumph over the dogmatism of supernatural religions and philosophical speculation, as Comte (1980) points out. Through the scientific method humanity constructs its truth —about itself and the biophysical nature in which it is inserted—; by means of science the world is revealed to it, although it must frame that truth within the existential framework provided by the rights religion.

The UN builds the problem of climate change through the IPCC, which since 1990 has published six Assessment Reports to evaluate the emergence and progress of this phenomenon, as well as its consequences. The conclusions of these reports are taken by the Secretary-General as certainties that justify the climate exodus:

"For decades, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has put forward evidence on how people and planet are being rocked by climate destruction. With report after report, and fact upon fact, you have built the case – setting out the science of climate change and the urgency for climate action. The evidence has been clear, convincing and irrefutable" (M13).

For the same reason, only science can certify the arrival of the Promised Land, when a state of "net zero emissions" of carbon dioxide is achieved. At present, the IPCC, through the Secretary-General, assures that it is still possible to avoid climate "catastrophe" by limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, but only if immediate and forceful action is taken at the planetary level to reduce emissions (M13; M20; M29A; M29G; A20). The circumstances could

not be more dramatic: “The choices and actions implemented in this decade will have impacts now and for thousands of years” (IPCC, 2023, p. 24).

The journey from fossil fuel slavery to climate liberation

In Egypt, the Hebrews went from prosperity to oppression at the hands of a new Pharaoh. In this subjugation, the figure of Moses emerges, called by God in the burning bush to free Israel. After the Pharaoh's initial resistance to freeing them, when the ten plagues of divine punishment were sent, they were finally able to leave, beginning their Exodus to the Promised Land (Ex. 1-13).

In the modern case, the perception of the oppression of humanity by fossil energy appears around 1990 (Jackson, n/d), after decades of (unequal) economic growth associated with these fuels. The UN, the collective prophet of humanity since the 1970s (Moyn, 2010), is responsible for mobilizing states to begin the global climate exodus; but, like the Egyptians, those who control the fossil economy —developed countries, transnational companies— resist this liberation, despite growing climatic incidences, described as “disasters”, “catastrophes” and “chaos” by the Secretary-General (Eg). These climatic plagues would be acts of self-punishment by humanity, because “humans are responsible for practically all global warming over the last 200 years” (M20).

More than three decades after the irruption of climate change into the human imaginary, the Secretary-General can still affirm: “Our world is still addicted to fossil fuels with the 1.5 degree goal fast slipping out of reach” (E14). This “addiction,” or enslavement, hinders the liberation of humanity, like the Egyptians' persecution of the Israelite people (Ex. 14). The final confrontation between Egypt and Israel at the Red Sea is reflected in the discourse of the current prophet, who, supported by the IPCC, characterizes the present decade as decisive to defeat the oppressor.

Waging a dialectical battle, fossil corporations are warned: “If you cannot set a credible course for net-zero, with 2025 and 2030 targets covering all your operations, you should not be in business” (F6). The message is: reconfigure to align with humanity, or die. On the other hand, it encourages humanity to definitively renounce its “addiction” during this decade, which has involved waging “war against nature”:

“We must end the merciless, relentless, and senseless war on nature. (...) 2023 is a year of reckoning. It must be a year of game-changing climate action. (...) We must focus on two urgent priorities: cutting emissions and achieving climate justice. Global emissions must be halved this decade” (F6; also A25S in relation to the 2023 *Progresos realizados para lograr los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible* report).

Even if the turning point between the dominance of the fossil economy and the commitment to renewables is crossed now—in the next few years— there will still be decades of energy transition to reach the climatic Promised Land, in a similar way to the Israelites in the biblical Exodus, who wandered in the desert for forty years (Biblia de Jerusalén, 1998, Ex. 16:35). The energy transition is haunted by dangers and hostilities resulting from economic, geopolitical and climatic uncertainties, as well as possible effects of the fossil hangover. During this time, which should end by 2050, the Secretary-General asks for the persistent obedience of humanity: “Let us all do our part to protect our common home for the sake of people and planet right now, and for the generations to come” (A22).

If in the desert Israel must obey the divine will (Biblia de Jerusalén, 1998, Ex. 16:28), in the energy transition humanity depends on its own will, that is, to obey itself by following the indications of its supreme representatives—in particular, the Secretary-General—who interpret human revelation—human rights and science—in relation to climate change to discover the path that humanity must take.

This discernment, the product of reflection on climate change in the last three decades, has crystallized into a master plan for “climate action” (E18; F6; M29A; M29G), which the Secretary-General summarizes in a series of actions on a global scale associated with the elimination of fossil fuels and the implementation of “clean/green” energies (M29A). The UN takes the lead and coordinates, while each country must take responsibility for its own climate action.

With a clear plan in hand, it seems easy: “We know exactly what is needed, and we have the tools” (M29A); “we have never been better equipped to solve the climate challenge” (M20 and M29A). The problem is that, like the Hebrews in their ordeal, humanity does not obey; it even stubbornly turns back:

“The SDG Progress Report shows that just 12 percent of the Sustainable Development Goal targets are on track. Progress on 50 percent is weak and insufficient. Worst of all, we have stalled or gone into reverse on more than 30 percent of the SDGs (...) And our war on nature is accelerating. Emissions continue to rise – unbelievably” (M29A).

In spite of this calamitous scenario, like Moses, the Secretary-General perseveres. Another strategy of this leadership is to evoke the climate Promised Land, with the imaginary of “renewable energies” and “climate justice”. The Secretary-General constructs a non-negotiable and idyllic vision of the renewable world: “If we are to avert climate catastrophe, renewables are the only credible path forward. Only renewables can safeguard our future, close the energy access gap, stabilize prices and ensure energy security”. (E14; also A20, A25T). As he states, renewables would make it possible to close the current “energy gap” for the benefit of “climate justice”.

Moral leadership: the prophet UN-Secretary-General

The prophet is the bearer of the authentic existential message, but paradoxically, unpopular, because he calls for individual and social conversion, demanding an exodus from self-indulgent and, in the end, subhuman existences, towards genuine, fully human lives. This authenticity implies that he cannot fail as a prophet, although he can as a person. He differs from the seer in that his task is not to divine the future, but to interpret correctly the will of the referential Absolute (Frye, 1982).

These features are reflected in the speech of the Secretary-General. First of all, his insistent and emphatic warning to humanity about the “crisis”, “impacts” and “consequences” of climate change, both in the present and in the future, is unpleasant and may generate fear, anxiety and other negative states of mind. Who can remain indifferent to these statements: “Today’s policies would make our world 2.8 degrees hotter by the end of the century.

And this is a death sentence” (A20). One way to frame them is to accuse them of falsehood or exaggeration, whether at the political, rhetorical, or scientific level (e.g., Associated Press, 2020; Ivic, 2023; Paez, 2010). Nonetheless, most of humanity accepts the word of the UN, and especially its leader, as the truth: climate change is a “global emergency” that requires immediate and effective concerted action (UNDP, 2021). Given the mission of the UN, it is also accepted that it is the UN that interprets the general will of humanity with respect to climate change, thus constructing the discourse of “climate action”.

Beyond the technical leadership needed to outline and spearhead action plans, the Secretary General is, above all, a moral leader: the prophet bent on converting humanity to the climate cause, to save it from itself, from its short-term selfishness. In order to achieve this, he proposes, on one hand, a dramatic rhetoric aimed at inciting climate action; on the other hand, a moral scenario in which a series of actors —heroes, villains and victims— establish relationships of “climate (in)justice”.

The discursive drama includes strategies of evocation, factuality, forcefulness, temporal totalization and exigency. Evocation appeals to metaphorical language to engage the imagination and affectivity of the public, and presents memorable phrases that may be popularized as slogans to propagate the cause (Table A1). The Secretary-General appeals to the imaginary of violence and death in relation to fossil fuels and their climatic consequences, including the criticality of the present moment, characterizing it as a “climate bomb”. This existential threat must involve “stepping on the gas” in climate action towards a “green” and “clean” world (Table A1).

Table A1. Typology of metaphors used by the UN Secretary-General.

<i>Category (number)</i>	<i>Main metaphor (number)</i>	<i>Sources of the main metaphor</i>
Fossil fuels (3)	"Economies remain hostage to fossil fuels" (2)	M29A, A25T
Destruction of nature (9)	"War on nature" (4) "Vampiric overconsumption is draining the lifeblood of our planet water" (2)	E18, F6, A22, A25S F6, M22
Consequences of climate change (11)	"Death sentence" (6)	E14, E18, F14, F14, M29G, A20, A25T
Climate limit (7)	"Keep the 1.5-degree limit alive" (5)	E18, F6, M20, M29A, A20
Critical moment (7)	"World is at a crossroads" (3) "Climate time-bomb" (2)	M13 M20
Injustice (3)	None	
Climate action (7)	None	
Accelerating climate action (5)	"[Governments] hit fast forward on their net zero timelines" (3)	M20, M29A, A25T
Humanity (3)	"Water is humanity's lifeblood" (2)	F6, M22
Renewables (7)	"Clean energy/technologies" (3) "Green jobs/ fund/investments" (4)	E14, M29A E14, M20, A20
Simulation (4)	"Greenwash(ing)" (4)	E18, F6, M29A, A25T

Source: Preparation by the author.

To complement and support these evocations, the prophet invokes Scientific authority, mainly the latest IPCC report (Table A2). These scientific citations supply factual credibility to the moral discourse; they also allow the Secretary-General to take the rhetorical license to use intensifiers that absolutize his reflections (Table A3), since his statements are informed by seemingly incontrovertible scientific 'facts' and 'data'. In this

way, he gives out adjectives and other linguistic formulas that charge the message towards a vision of contrasts, confronting the climatic Good and Evil. On one side is the “history of recklessness, injustice and greed” associated with fossil fuels, which entails a “war against nature”; on the other, the “renewables revolution”, which is “the only credible path” for humanity, conveyed by “climate action on all fronts: everything, everywhere, all at once” (Table A3).

Table A2. Typology of authorities invoked by the UN Secretary-General.

Category (number)	Sources (number)
IPCC report (17)	M13 (10), M20 (3), M29A, M29G (2), A20
Statistics and scientific data (16)	E9, E14 (4), E18, M22, A25S (2), A25T (7)
Science, in general (4)	E18, M13 (2), A20
UN “High-level expert group” on guidelines for zero net emissions (4)	E18, F6, M20, M29A
Organizations (4, 3 from the UN)	F14 (2), A20, A25T
Others (8)	F27, A17, A22 (3), A25S (3)

Source: Preparation by the author.

Table A3. Typology of intensifiers related to the subject “we/us”/ “humanity”/“world” in the discourse of the UN Secretary-General.

Category	Quote with intensifier(s) (number, if applicable)
Fossil fuels	“Story of recklessness, injustice and greed”, “Addiction to fossil fuels”, “Self-destructive fossil fuel resurgence”
Nature	“War on nature”, “Self-defeating war on nature”, “Relentless and senseless wars on nature”, “Merciless, relentless, and senseless war on nature”, “Hellbent on destruction”, “Vampiric overconsumption”, “Brutal and even irreversible consequences”, “Ecosystem meltdown is cold, hard, scientific fact”
Climate	“Climate crisis” (4), “Climate disaster”, “Climate catastrophe”
Critical moment	“Narrow window to avert catastrophe”, “Humanity is on thin ice – and that ice is melting fast”, “Crucial issues”, “Turning up the volume on this critical issue”,

	"Now is the time to speak up, louder than ever", "This is a moment to stand on the right side of history. A moment to stand up for the human rights of everyone, everywhere", "Let's be clear: no country can afford to see them fail", "Mass exodus of entire populations on a biblical scale"
Justice	"Climate justice" (6), "Fundamental wrong", "Brutal injustice", "Outrageous trend", "Critical and colossal mission", "The most vulnerable countries and communities who have done the least to cause the crisis"
Climate action	"Unprecedented call", "Real climate action", "Climate action with deeper, faster emissions cuts", "Warp speed climate action", "Quantum leap in climate action" (2), "Quantum leap forward – with immediate and deep emissions cuts across the board", "Climate action on all fronts – everything, everywhere, all at once", "No more baby steps. No more excuses. No more greenwashing", "Move into high gear", "Massively scaled-up investments", "Fair and just decarbonization in every sector"
Renewables	"Millions of green jobs", "Renewables revolution" (3), "The only credible path"

Source: Preparation by the author.

Every individual, group and nation must choose a side; and not only must take a stand—not just at some point in their lives, but immediately. The ultimate success of the climatic exodus depends greatly on its temporality; the prophet makes this clear through a series of markers that he reiterates in his interventions (Table A4). These are divided into three groups: immediacy, acceleration and transition, and communicate acting now and in an accelerated manner in order to move forward adequately.

Table A4. Markers of temporality in discourse of the UN Secretary-General.

Markers	Number	Sources (number)
"Today"	16	E14 (3), E18 (2), F27 (3), M20 (3), M29A, M29G, A20, A25S, A25T
"Now"	16	E14, E18 (2), F6, F27, M13, M20 (2), M29A (2), M29G, A22, A25S (2), A25T (2)
"Immediate"	12	F6 (2), M20, M29A (4), A17
"Urgency"	7	E9, F6, F14, M13 (2), M29A, A20
"Acceleration"	25	E9, F6, E18, M13, M20 (4), M22, M29A (4), M29G, A20 (7), A22, A25S (2), A25T
"Fast", "rapid"	15+3	"fast": E14 (3), F14 (2), M20 (3), M29A (2), M29G, A20, A22, A25T (2); 'rapid': F6, M13, M29G
"Speed", "race"	6+1	"speed": E9, F6, M20 (2), M29A, A17; 'race': M13
"Transition".	25	E14 (5), E18 (2), F6 (2), M20 (4), M29A (10), A20 (2)
"Forward"	9	E14, E18, F6, F27, M20, M29A (3), A25T
"This decade"	5	E14, E18, F6, M20, M29G

Source: Preparation by the author.

Finally, these four strategies—evocation, factuality, forcefulness, and temporal totalization—are integrated into statements indicating who should act and how. From his moral authority, the prophet gives moral orders to the leaders and business leaders through predicates of exigency linked to his person ("I") and to humanity ("we"). These directives, as well as the proposals for climate action that the Secretary-General attributes to himself, are considerably more important than other predicates (82% for "I" and 69% for "we") (Tables A5 and A6).

Table A5. “I” statements in discourse of the UN- Secretary-General.

<i>Demand statements</i>	<i>Sources (number)</i>
“I urge...”	M20, M29A, A20 (4), A22, A25T
“I call on...”	E18, M20, M29A (2)
“I count on... (to...)”	M20, M29A
“I am asking...”	M29A
“I demand...”	A22
Total:	16
<i>Proposition statements</i>	<i>Sources</i>
“I have put forward...”	E14
“I have proposed...”	E14, M22, M29A, A20, A25T
“I am presenting...”	14, M22, M29A, M29G, A20
Total	11
<i>Other statements (“I [VERB]...”): 6 different statements; 3 without repetition and 3 repeated two or three times.</i>	

Source: Preparation by the author.

Table A6. “We/us” statements in discourse of the UN- Secretary-General.

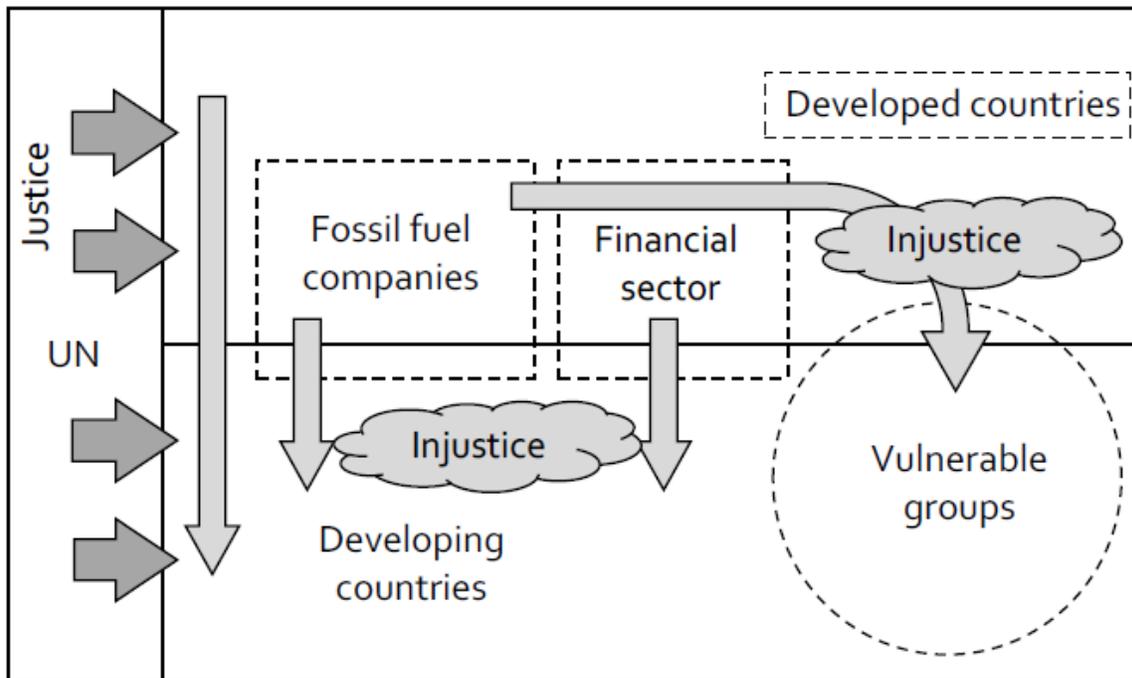
<i>Demand statements</i>	<i>Sources (number)</i>
“We must...”	E14 (5), E18, F6 (4), F14 (3), F27, M20 (2), M22, M29A, A17, A20 (2), A22 (3), A25T
“Let’s” / “let us”	E14, M29G, A22 (2), A25S
“We need...”	E9 (5), E18, F6, F14, M20, M29A (2), A20 (2), A22 (2), A25S, A25T (2)
Total	48
<i>Other statements (“We [VERB]...”): 22 different statements; 16 without repetition and 6 repeated two or three times.</i>	

Source: Preparation by the author.

From this dramatic rhetoric, a moral scenario emerges, bringing into play relations of climate (in)justice between specific actors (Figure 2). Human rights frame this drama and

violating them is a 'sin', since it implies transgressing the revelation/will of Humanity. Beyond individual violations, others are enabled by power structures within and between countries. The prophet calls this social sin "injustice" and, in the case of climate change, "climatic injustice". This second domination arises from the degree of economic development of states.

Figure 2. Actors and (in)justice in climate change based on discourse of the UN Secretary-General.



Source: Preparation by the author.

The “developed countries” —summarized by the Secretary-General as “G20” — concentrate the global economy, particularly the fossil fuel transnationals and the financial sector. Their development trajectory and their continued interest in increasing it (through fossil fuels and finance, among other instruments) have caused climate change and, furthermore, discourage climate action. On the other hand, the “developing countries” concentrate social vulnerability and, consequently, are the most affected by climate change, without having caused it: “The most vulnerable countries and communities who have done the least to cause the crisis” (A22). And the UN is taking on the task of correcting

this injustice: “United Nations staff working around the world to support climate action and climate justice” (A25T).

If the UN is the hero of this story, the victims are the developing countries, vulnerable groups and nature, then who are the villains? The fossil transnationals, the profit-oriented financial sector and the developed countries insofar as they do not assume their responsibility as the primary causes of climate change. Humanity as such plays an ambivalent, tragicomic role; like the alienated prodigal son (Biblia de Jerusalén, 1998, Lk. 15:11-32), it must return to itself, to its own humanity. It is to this task of reunion that the prophet addresses himself, with his discourse of conversion to climatic action.

The prophetic denunciation is directed, especially, at fossil fuel companies and the financial sector. These corporations are the enemies of humanity and embody the Evil: “Today, fossil fuel producers and their enablers are still racing to expand production, knowing full well that this business model is inconsistent with human survival. Now, this insanity belongs in science fiction, yet we know the ecosystem meltdown is cold, hard scientific fact” (E18); “history is coming for the planet wreckers. For the fossil fuel barons and their enablers, profiting from destruction” (A25T). Along the same lines, although blurring corporate responsibility, he disqualifies financial capitalism as “a morally bankrupt global financial system” (Eg), because —it is understood— the big financial institutions (like any transnational corporation?) prioritize profit over human welfare.

In contrast, the criticism of the developed countries reveals certain limits, which point to a (co-)measured and constructive confrontation, and which are attributable to political prudence, the nature of the UN —a club of States— and support for the current world order—capitalism, the State. The G20's indifference, passivity, simulation and/or refusal of climate action is not openly condemned; rather, in addition to reducing its emissions, it is urged to pay for the climate fight and support developing countries (Eg, E14, E18, F6, M20, M22, M29A, A20). Beyond the discourse of the Secretary-General, the UN hopes that the volume —the effervescence— of climate-related activities —dialogue, meetings, plans, monitoring, etc.— can draw countries, especially the G20, into the course of climate action.

In this task of generating a multilateral movement, the prophet appeals to the values of “cooperation” (M29G, A20) and “solidarity” (A25S). Cleverly, this is how he titles his most recent plan: “I have called for a Climate Solidarity Pact in which all big emitters make an extra effort to reduce emissions this decade and ensure financial and technological support for countries that need it” (E14; also mentioned in E18, F6, M20, M22, M29A, A20). Now, it remains to be seen whether climate hyperactivism of the UN and, in particular, the prophetic speech of its leader, are enough to slow down climate change to 1.5 degrees.

Discussion

This section considered the research questions and hypotheses from the findings. We begin by addressing the second research question, on sacralizing discursive processes. The hypothesis that the UN discourse on climate change mobilizes myths that construct the human rights religion is verified. Specifically, it has been shown how the Secretary-General articulates his discourse around the biblical Exodus myth, actualizing it in a climate exodus led by himself and the UN. This appropriation of the exodus is congruent with the Judeo-Christian cultural background of both the religion of human rights (Moyn, 2010) and the Secretary-General, of Portuguese nationality. Moreover, as Aguirre (2024) has recently argued, the exodus-liberation myth constitutes a central semiotic pattern in the West, frequently employed to legitimize and sacralize characters, elements and political projects. In Latin America it has motivated liberation theology (Panotto, 2015) and its philosophical counterpart (Teruel, 2024).

Two clarifications are in order: on the one hand, these interventions surely have collective authorship, although what is important is their assumption by the Secretary-General as their own, which gives them their authority; on the other hand, it cannot be affirmed that this mythical mobilization is intentional, in the absence of evidence that escapes this inquiry. In any case, the Exodus allows representing transitions from undesirable situations to desired future states and, hence, integrates a salvific logic attractive to religions and utopias (Aínsa, 2004; Scalone, 2014). Then, can the UN use this myth to face other global problems? Not necessarily, because its enablement requires

some consensus on the criticized situation and the desired future. In relation to climate change, science and renewable fuels provide such consensuses, but there are no such agreements about war, poverty, governance or migration. Climate change lends itself to the Exodus myth precisely because the UN can absolutize its cause and solution as indisputable truths.

The climate exodus constructs the human rights religion because it sacralizes the UN as the prophet of humanity, conferring on its authority in three areas: prophetic-ecclesial, moral and doctrinal. This myth endorses the prophetic-ecclesial leadership that the UN plays for humanity; in particular, by claiming the initiative in global climate action, the Secretary-General exalts himself as the supreme prophet-priest. The Secretary-General, and by extension the UN, are charged, according to this account, with elucidating and interpreting the general will of humanity for humanity; in other words, there is no climate salvation outside the UN church—in Latin, *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*—.

This leadership implies, secondly, the authority to morally discipline states and the private sector, which operates with the consent of the State. At the same time, the Secretary-General calls on global civil society to demand that they act in accordance with UN guidelines; this popular empowerment strengthens the moral authority of the UN and weakens the power of the state, especially one that does not convert to climate action. Finally, the climate exodus reaffirms the human rights doctrine and reinforces the idea that it must be interpreted by the UN, in particular the Secretary-General, to navigate the twists and turns of humanity's existential journey. Human rights, humanity's revelation to itself, parameterize what is good, necessary and desirable, and any phenomenon or social problem, such as climate change, must conform to them.

This reading of the discourse on climate change as exodus differs from the apocalyptic hypothesis mentioned above. According to Frye (1982), apocalypse implies a certain devastation of the social order and the Earth, a final judgment that divides the saved from the lost, and the establishment of a new regime that overcomes the antagonisms that led to the end of the old world. However, these characteristics are only partially in keeping with the examined corpus. Certainly, the Secretary-General alludes to the terrible consequences of climate change, but he does not assure that they will be

completely devastating, nor that they will bring about the end of the established order. Rather, it is a real and imminent threat that can and must, however, be reversed to some extent.

The destructive fatalism of the apocalyptic myth is therefore ruled out. Nor does the Secretary-General make explicit a division of humanity; he only openly condemns the companies and politicians who are determined to continue profiting from fossil fuels. Finally, neither is the advent of a new world announced after a climate catastrophe; on the contrary, the Promised Land of renewable energies is achieved through global conversion to climate action, and is therefore a by-product of the present world. At most, the account of the Secretary-General resembles the “comic apocalypse” or “intensifying apocalypse” described by Foust and Murphy (2009), and Fagan (2017), respectively, in which humanity can avoid purification by fire; however, rather than clarifying, these adjectivations obscure the Exodus myth, violating the Apocalypse to incorporate the human voluntarism inherent in the Exodus.

This first reflection concludes by pointing out that, in order to survive and develop, the human rights religion, like other religions, adapts to the vicissitudes of the historical flux by renewing its legitimizing narratives, while using them to construct its Transcendent; in this case, climate exodus sacralizes human rights and the UN.

The discourse of the Secretary-General also provides clues as to how the human rights religion competes with civil religion; in particular, according to the first hypothesis, an asymmetrical struggle is observed, with subordination of the former by the latter, in line with the modern dominance of state reason over other religions (Machiavelli, 2010; Rousseau, 1997). The Secretary-General calls for the conversion of States and companies, but in a way that dilutes this moral imperative. He proposes a technical solution — renewable energies, donations from developed countries to make the energy transition viable— to a problem of a moral nature, namely the violation of human rights by civil religion, which enthroned the bourgeois state (Marx and Ruge, 1970).

Technology is being sacralized, knowingly or not, as an extension of the sacrosanct human being (Siegemund, 2021), contributing to transhumanism. The problem is that this technological bet frequently serves to dodge the moral demands of human rights,

confusing technological progress with moral progress, as Rousseau (1998) remarked in his *Discurso sobre las ciencias y las artes*. In other words, the Secretary-General omits the basic contradiction between the reason of the State and that of the person-humanity; although, from the start, he poses a moral scenario where these incompatible logics operate (Figure 2), he stereotypes and reduces the villain to fossil corporations and, in the abstract, to the “financial system”, obviating the responsibility of the State, specifically, of the political-economic elites that control it and that not only allow, but encourage the fossil economy.

Thus, a discourse of “sustainable development” is configured, which apparently denounces but basically accepts the premises that have led to climate change (Velázquez, 2014). This compromise with the energy status quo reveals the political prudence of the Secretary General, who knows that the States that pollute the most are those that contribute the most to the UN budget (Expansión, n.d.; UN, 2023). The conflict of interest between the sacred and money, or power, is not intrinsic to the human rights religion; other religions also modulate their prophetism towards civil religion in exchange for financial or political advantages (e.g. Barranco, 2023).

The avoidance of these underlying conflicts is evidence of a submission of the rights religion to the civil religion; without openly questioning the authority of state sacralization, “solidarity” and “cooperation” are implored. Lacking factual power over the structures that organize social reality, the rights religion attempts to influence civil religion through the symbolic construction of the supremacy of human rights, here—in the analyzed corpus—by appealing to the Exodus myth, which resonates with the Western mentality. However, frequent examples of simulation or instrumentalization of human rights by states (e.g. Velasco, 2014) support the analogy of the Machiavellian prince's behavior with respect to Christianity (Machiavelli, 2010). All this does not bode well for a genuine conversion to climate action, based on the morality of rights; the shape and pace of the energy transition (inevitable, because oil is a non-renewable resource) will be derived, for the time being, from state self-interest, for “national security” (Methmann and Rothe, 2012).

A cynical interpretation might accuse the Secretary-General of being a false prophet, in line with the prophets of the Old Testament (Frye, 1982). I think this extreme reading is baseless, because it cannot explain the growth and impact of the rights religion

in the last 75 years. However, its subjugation to civil religion generates weariness, frustration and discouragement in those who believe in human rights or fosters a dissociative attitude that separates discourse from action.

If in the medium-long term it does not manage to hegemonize itself it could end up accommodating itself to its subordinate role, in an arrangement of convenience with the State that allows it some autonomy and rhetorical freedom, as long as it does not threaten state sacralization; like other religions, which have preferred organizational comfort to the dangers of prophetism (e.g. Cardenal, 2015). This post-conflict scenario would involve a privatization of the human rights religion (without the UN necessarily disappearing) and its slide towards a gnostic-platonic faith, of salvation by knowledge and ritualism (along with the good works of rights that the State consents to).

Conclusion

Despite an apparent global consensus around the preeminence of human rights, there is a significant gap between the rhetoric of rights and their fulfillment. This study has approached this issue from the analytical framework of religion and in relation to the case of climate change. Specifically, it has been interested in the competition between human rights religion and civil religion and in mythicization as a discursive process of sacralization in the service of the religion of rights. It has been shown how the UN Secretary-General's discourse on climate change is structured around by the myth of the biblical exodus, which is reinterpreted in a climatic exodus. This characterization sacralizes the UN and the secretary-general himself, conferring upon them prophetic-ecclesial, moral and doctrinal authority.

This finding contradicts with previous studies, which find an appropriation of the myth of the Apocalypse based on documentary inquiries. However, such a reading is not supported by examining the oral interventions of the Secretary-General. On the other hand, in his discourse there is evidence of a certain criticism of civil religion, but from a perspective of subordination that does not openly confront the contradictions between the state interests and human rights. Although symbolically the rights religion may have unseated the state from its transcendental throne, there is a gap between the normative

weight of rights and state-centric power structures. This gap may or may not be temporary, depending on the course of the struggle between these religions in the coming decades.

Nowadays, one answer to why the right of humanity to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, free of climate change, is not being fulfilled is that this new religion cannot yet compete effectively with civil religion. In this contest, the discourse of the Secretary-General is ambivalent: it builds the rights religion and, simultaneously, reaffirms state hegemony.

That being said, the results, discussion, and conclusion described above respond to the research method employed, which is limited in several ways: the temporal scope of the corpus can be extended; the oral interventions of the Secretary-General can be diversified to other UN actors and types of records; the Exodus myth surely shares the stage with Judeo-Christian or other myths; and the selection of climate change must be framed within the discursive treatment by the UN of other global problems, whose consideration pluralizes the modes of symbolic construction of the rights religion. In any case, let these limitations serve as an incentive for further inquiries into the hieropoiesis of this religion, from which much is expected.

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