

“Liberation Theology opted for the Poor, and the Poor opted for [Neo-]Pentecostalism”: Illustrating the Influence of the “Prosperity Gospel” in Brazil¹

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One of the most significant movements in the history of Christianity is Pentecostalism, and Brazil probably has the largest number of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians in the world. Pentecostalism is a global phenomenon and exhibits diversity of expression, depending on a combination of factors that include culture, ecclesial traditions, and localized beliefs and practices. Amid this religious diversity certain key ideas appear to be pervasive if not altogether universal. One of these key ideas is the so-called “prosperity gospel”, which refers to the belief that as part of the blessings of the kingdom of God, believers have the right to expect both health and material benefit. One of the contradictions with this kind of religious expression is the fact that the people who appear to hold to this view most ardently are in fact the poor of Pentecostalism. Why is it the case that the poorest of the poor hold on to a view that is often transmitted from the United States of America and appears to reflect the material aspirations associated with the “American dream” rather than the empirical realities of Latin American contexts? This paper seeks to illustrate how [Neo-]Pentecostals hold on to their belief in the “prosperity gospel”, identifying the key biblical text that is used in this hermeneutic, as well as the cultural practices that support its maintenance. From this analysis, questions are raised about what aspects might inform the so-called historic churches when seeking to negotiate their relationship with [Neo-]Pentecostals.

Introduction

The quotation at the beginning of the title of this study is a famous one and it is usually attributed to an Argentine liberation theologian (Miller 2006), who is making an important point about the role of a movement within the Roman Catholic church, namely an historic “option for the poor” in contexts where the number of the “poor” is considerable. The

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poor themselves have ignored this preference towards them and have instead opted for an alternative one, namely Pentecostalism (Martins and de Pádua 2002; Martin 2005, 150; von Sinner 2012b, 102–112). Of course, the suggestion that liberation theology is a failed theological movement is contested, and rightly so (Chesnut 1997; 2003). Neverthe-



less, the idea that elitist and educated theologians can have a preferential option for the poor and yet be ignored by the poorest of the poor in favour of what appears to be a regressive, patriarchal and seemingly right-wing fundamentalist form of religion, is deeply uncomfortable. Nevertheless, this appears to be what is happening in different countries around the world and including Brazil. *Therefore, this study seeks to illuminate aspects of the relationship between the prosperity gospel and [Neo-]Pentecostalism by looking at the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in order to give insight into the way this Brazilian denomination has assimilated specific American features that date back to the Pentecostalism of the 1970s.* First, Brazilian Pentecostalism is introduced before sociological and religious reasons for growth are considered. Second, the prosperity gospel is illustrated with respect to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God before suggestions are made for the historic denominations in Brazil to consider.

Brazilian Pentecostalism

Brazil is not a poor country (von Sinner, 2012b, 35, notes that it stands tenth in the world's largest economies as measured by GDP); but it has a lot of poor people, whose life chances are limited because of a massive inequality in the distribution of resources. In terms of religion, it is not hugely diverse, with around 87 % still claiming to be Christian. Of that 87 % around 64 % would claim to be Roman Catholic and just over 22 % designate themselves Protestant, which would include Pentecostals as the largest group in that bracket (Moreira 2018, 1). Thus, Pentecostals would still appear to be a minority but they are growing at such an amazing rate that they are attracting media and scholarly attention. As Martins and de Pádua explain:

The social exclusion suffered by the poor population in Brazilian modernisation creates a type of magic pretence that has the capacity to explain, through mystic and supernatural powers, the causes of social injustice and the misfortune lived by the individual. This magic reasoning represents a way of relating with the world, taking away human responsibility in the social and historic construction of one's own destiny, that is submitted totally or partially to the intervention of mystical powers, and that transcends the capacity of the individual and demands a ritual control of its interference (Martins and de Pádua 2002, 152).

This is a particular sociological analysis that captures something of the mix of the various factors involved: social exclusion, poverty, social change, spirituality, human responsibility and the creation of an alternative reality that stands in contrast to the experiences of life that the “world” has to offer.

Pentecostal Strategies

Most commentators tend to agree that the strategies the Pentecostal movement uses include a radical conversion away from the domain of the world, with its street life of crime, violence, alcohol, drugs and sexual licentiousness (Chesnut 1997, 17). Pentecostal groups, at least historically, have been sectarian, creating alternative enclaves, whereby people can be saved from the world and can be safe with God. It was often women who first became interested: miserable at home, perhaps with abusive and violent partners, poor and scraping by on whatever money was left over from the drinking, gambling and street life (Chesnut 1997, 62–64). By hook or by crook, they managed to drag their men along to a Pentecostal meeting where they experienced the “power of God”, were converted and subsequently found a new set of social relationships in the church that supplanted those on the streets, leaving behind machismo culture and investing what they had into the domestic realm and the life of the church (Medcraft 1987, 83–85). With the better use of resources, the family could eat well, buy nicer clothes, even acquire electrical goods, and send their children to different schools. Thus, we see the beginning of social mobility and an ethic of “self-betterment” (Martin 2013, 38). In the middle of these aspirations is the role of “faith”. It is the women who believe first and who exercise power, but in order to maintain this ethic of self-betterment, they subsequently endorse the patriarchal culture of the church. It is what Bernice Martin calls the Pentecostal gender paradox (Martin 2001; Brusco 2010). They are empowered within a patriarchal casing that is fragile. Should they choose to topple it, they would be the ultimate losers and they know exactly what that would mean for them and their families. And it is largely through the network of family relationships that Pentecostalism has grown, with women at its heart. Men are no longer seen as “masters” or “oppressors” but as “victims” of evil, capable of being liberated (von Sinner 2012a).



The Rise of Pentecostalism in Brazil

Brazil, as a former Portuguese colony, has been largely associated with the Roman Catholic church from around 1500. Protestants, for example the Huguenots, tried to obtain a foothold in the country in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively, only to be expelled (Hollenweger 1972, 94–95). While Protestantism arrived after independence in 1822, the separation of church and state and the establishment of freedom of religion occurred in 1890, although with a partial re-establishment through the influence of Cardinal Sebastiao Leme in the 1920s and 1930s. This led to a *de facto* Roman Catholic monopoly until the 1950s (Chesnut 2003, 30–35). Pentecostalism landed at the beginning of the twentieth century via two separate missionary groups around the same time with Europeans who had experienced the impact of Pentecostalism via William Durham in Chicago. The Assemblies of God (*Assembleias de Deus*) denomination was started by two Swedish missionaries in 1911, Daniel Berg and Sumner Vingren, while the Christian Congregation of Brazil (*Congregação Cristã do Brasil* [hereafter: CCB]) was started by the Italian Luigi Franceson in 1910 (von Sinner 2012b, 131, 240–274). Both groups arrived in Brazil in 1910 having no knowledge of the other. Often historians call this the first wave of Pentecostalism, and both of these early Pentecostals predate the formation of classical Pentecostalism in the USA (Hollenweger 1972, 75). The second wave is associated with the arrival of the established Pentecostal denominations from the USA, like the Foursquare denomination, from the 1950s and the use of mass rallies in sport stadia. “And by the 1950s, Pentecostalism had won enough converts to be able to bring a permanent end to the four-and-a-half-centuries of a monopolistic religious economy” (Chesnut 2003, 35). But it is also associated with the establishment of newer Brazilian Pentecostal denominations such as Brazil for Christ (*Igreja Pentecostal o Brasil para Cristo*) founded by Manoel de Mello in 1955, and the church God is Love (*Igreja Pentecostal Deus é Amor*) founded by Daví de Miranda in 1962. The third wave is traced to the mid 1970s and linked to newer kinds of Pentecostals (often referred to as “Neo-Pentecostals”) such as the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God ([hereafter: UCKG], *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*, also often referred to as IURD), which is less puritanical than older forms of Pentecostalism and emphasizes prosperity, healing and mass exorcisms in its ser-

vices (Chesnut 1997, 39–40). It is these more recent churches that have attracted a lot of attention because of their intolerance of African Brazilian groups like the Umbanda. It is suggested that more recently these third wave type groups have moved into a fourth wave associated with neoliberal economics, commercial branding, media savvy, consumer orientation, syncretic tastes, and more explicit political engagement (Lingenthal 2012; Freston 1999).

Sociological Explanations

Sociological explanations for the rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America include the idea that the movement is one aligned with social change. With the rise of industrialization and urban migration, it is argued, the spirituality of Pentecostalism followed the same trajectory and clustered in cities, providing support for the displaced and disorientated. Alongside this explanation is the social protest account that sees Pentecostalism as fundamentally a protest movement against the establishment of capitalism (Medcraft 1987, 74–76). Another view suggests that while the elite held religious power via Roman Catholicism, Pentecostalism subverted this power by aligning itself with the lower social classes in order to legitimate social differentiation and give itself a social niche (Freston 1999, 148). This alignment with lower social classes also meant that it became a popular form of religion and was indigenized through the use of music, ritual expression and the social proximity of its leadership to the people, since they are led by their own. It has been suggested that its growth only really began substantially once this indigenization had taken place. Perhaps one of the most compelling reasons for the growth of Pentecostalism is that it provides an answer for the pathogens of poverty, the chief of which is a lack of health care (Chesnut 1997). Pentecostalism almost universally emphasizes healing because of its soteriology, whereby Christ is understood as the healer from sin-sickness. In a society with a lack of universal healthcare, the church becomes a hospital for the sick. In particular, it has become the main “detox centre” for men suffering from substance abuse (Chesnut 1997, 71). More recently, it has been suggested that Pentecostals have bought into a neoliberal cosmology and now see themselves as part of a global religious market (St. Clair 2017, 619). The typical consumer of Pentecostalism is a poor, mar-



ried, woman of colour, living on the urban periphery and a former nominal Roman Catholic (Chesnutt 2003, 158). As the middle classes have expanded, and as Pentecostalism has become more diverse, so it is now driven by a logic framed by this free market ideology. This may indeed be the case for some Pentecostals, especially Neo-Pentecostals, but it is not a universal narrative (Martin 2011, 120).

Religious Explanations

Some have suggested that there are specific religious reasons for its appeal and growth. These include the initial persecution by the Roman Catholic church and state officials. There is evidence that the religious hegemony of the Roman Catholic church has historically been threatened by this expression of Christianity, leading to persecution and sometimes violent attacks, especially in the 1930s (Chesnutt 1997, 33). This led to a sense of religious marginalization by Pentecostals, which was embraced as a religious virtue. They stood not only against the world, but also against other forms of religion, including other expressions of Christianity (St. Clair, 2017, 617). On this account, difference was accentuated. But underlying this difference is another reason, one which has resonance across not only Christianity but other religious traditions as well, namely mysticism based in religious experience (Hollenweger 1972, 102). It is noted by commentators who suggest that Pentecostals have much in common with other mystical types of religion and this is where there are comparisons to be made at a phenomenological level. Pentecostals frame their spiritual experiences in a unique way by emphasizing the primacy of Pentecost as the defining narrative, especially the doctrine of Baptism in the Spirit as a post-conversion dramatic experience evidenced by particular signs, such as speaking in tongues (Medcraft 1987, 80). And with this empowerment of the Holy Spirit comes a certain kind of spiritual egalitarianism since the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, including men and women, young and old, slave and free. And it is this Spirit empowerment which provides liberation from the constraints of the world in terms of economic reality, social status and educational opportunity (von Sinner 2012a, 109). When someone is empowered by the Spirit to serve and to lead, then they are qualified irrespective of who they are in the eyes of the world. There is a kind of social healing that takes place as a new dig-

nity is given and received in an alternative community, which is different and set apart from the world. The flip side to this experiential empowerment is the construction of a narrative that seeks to justify itself in terms of identity and this is where we also see the tension with forms of fundamentalism, which are intolerant, aggressive and, on occasions, violent, thus illustrating how some of the religious reasons have themselves come full circle (da Silva 2007; but cf. Freston 2013).

The Prosperity Gospel

One of the main reasons it appears that people are attracted to the prosperity gospel is because of the hope it gives people: there is a way out of poverty and lives can change for the better. If only they have sufficient faith to believe in the promises of God, things will change. The appeal is that they do not have to rely on anyone else but God and themselves, and the connection between the two is their faith (Martins and de Pádua 2002). In a society that has failed them, there is an alternative and it is provided by the community of the church. To outsiders, they might seem gullible, but if people have failed you all your life and you have to trust something or someone, then why not trust God? The cultural conventions of making vows are translated into making vows before God (Medcraft 1987, 78). The prosperity gospel church leaders use this mechanism to obtain finances for the church by employing what is called “the sowing of a seed” (Roberts 1970, 12). One begins by giving an amount of money as a “seed amount”, in the hope that by faith one will receive one’s financial needs as a return because of the goodness of God and his faithfulness to his promises (undergirding the process of vows). It is based on a reading of Luke 6.38: “Give and it shall be given unto you, good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal shall it be measured to you again” (version cited by Roberts 1970, 12) (Perriman 2003, 53–55).

An example of one of the Neo-Pentecostal prosperity gospel churches is the controversial Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God USA 2019; von Sinner 2012b, 135–137). This is a church that was founded by Edir Macedo, whose wealth was estimated at around \$950 million in 2013 and whose assets include TV networks, radio stations, a newspaper, music labels,



and a private jet (Smith and Campos 2015, 180). A full hour of a two-hour service can be used to admonish, solicit and collect tithes and offerings from the congregants by authoritarian and dominant pastors (Shaull and Waldo Cesar 2000, 26). For example, Bailey's account of a worship service is illuminating:

Speaking from a stage encircled by 12 large wooden crosses, Gabriel Camargo held up wads of fake Brazilian money, showing his flock what could be theirs.

"God will bless you if you give a lot more to the church", said Camargo, a Pentecostal pastor with the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

Then he extended an arm and pointed a black pouch toward his parishioners in the working-class neighbourhood of Osasco.

"Pick up your wallets and purses", he said, instructing his flock to look for Brazilian reais. About a dozen people hurried forward and dumped bills and coins into the bag.

Those without cash didn't have to worry: An usher held out a credit card machine. "You'll have so much money after giving generously to the church", the pastor boomed, "that smoke is going to come out of the machine".

In a country struggling with the worst economic crisis in its history, with long lines at unemployment offices and public health clinics, perhaps it's not surprising that Brazilians are increasingly drawn to the promises of personal wealth (Bailey 2017).

This is a church that connects with all sectors of society but especially the poor and uses this "seed faith" approach to obtain money from its adherents in order to resource its ever increasing operations. Even just a cursory glance at its website reveals an emphasis on tithing and offerings, responsibility and entrepreneurialism, consumerism and testimonies from members who have sown their financial seed and been rewarded. The English language version connects to American churches (they have planted churches in the US starting in LA) and the testimonial page includes four testimonies (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God USA 2019):

My financial life was terrible, I had 60 days to move out of my renting home. After sowing my seed, I now own my own house!
– Ms. Kim

I had to pay \$10,000 for a court case. After sowing my seed, God served me justice.
I went to court, and I didn't have to pay anything

anymore. I am debt free!
– Janneth Richards

Before sowing my seed, I had just lost my job. After I sowed my seed, I received a double blessing. I received my dream job, two houses, and two cars.
– Ms. Carla

I only had \$30 in my name in prison, and I sowed my seed.
As a result, my case dismissed and I now have a job.
– Arthur

Bowler describes this approach in a discussion of the history of the prosperity gospel in the USA. She suggests that the movement uses popular catchphrases to focus on the essence of its message and that these include "seed faith". The content of the "seed" can be a "prayer, tithe, word, emotion, or action, a 'seed' whose spiritual consequences – good or bad – had not come into season" (Bowler 2013, 67). In the Brazilian UCKG it appears that the "seed" has been narrowed to refer to money exclusively. Here we see the influence of neoliberal cosmology as noted above, whereby the spiritual realm is deeply embedded in the material and especially the financial such that neoliberal economics become part of the dominant ideological framework (Walsh 2011). Health and wealth are linked to a market economy and it has become just as branded as any American expression of Pentecostalism (Freston 2013, 117). However, as in all consumer societies, it is also the case that people are beginning to ask for their money back if they do not obtain the results that they hoped to achieve. Von Sinner observes the example of a member of the UCKG being manipulated into selling his car in order to give its value of 2,600 reais to the church precisely on the basis of a "positive return". When this "seed" did not produce the desired "harvest", the person wanted his money back. The matter went to court, which ruled in the favour of the "religious consumer" (von Sinner 2012a, 105). It remains to be seen just how successful such future "seed returns" will be.

And, as Chesnut observes, this approach is targeted towards a specific group of people:

Like their Pentecostal brethren in the United States, Latin American *crentes* are the most skilled marketers in the region's new religious economy. They have used diverse media to deliver the simple but potent message to prospective converts that affiliation with Pentecostalism will imbue them with sufficient supernatural strength to vanquish the demons of poverty. It is the dynamic and controversial [UCKG] that has captured the essence of



Pentecostal advertising in its evangelistic slogan, ‘stop suffering’. The pithy phrase ‘pare de sofrer’, typically printed in bright red letters, calls out to the afflicted poor of Brazil from the church walls, pamphlets, and newspapers of this innovative denomination. A combination of low- and high-tech media invite religious consumers, mainly nominal Catholics, to relieve their suffering by embracing Jesus and the Holy Spirit specifically within the walls of the particular church that is advertising its product (Chesnut 2003, 51).

Of course, we need to be careful in our portrayal of Pentecostalism. It is not homogeneous and while there are common themes, there are also huge differences across time and place. One such difference is the stark comparison of the UCKG with one of the earliest Pentecostal churches in Brazil, the CCB. In an insightful article, St. Claire argues that there is a reaction to the prosperity gospel message by some Pentecostals, who see God as not providing certain things like new and better paid jobs because of his will for their lives in their own circumstances. This anti-prosperity discourse provides a counter narrative and suggests that we need to take care in our generalizations when commenting on Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity (St. Clair, 2017).

Conclusion: Possible Insights for the Historic Churches

What insights might these observations raise for the so-called historic churches? Three may be suggested.

First, there is a common spirituality that permeates Pentecostalism and Catholicism, broadly understood, and the Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement has tapped into this stream as part of an attempt to respond to Pentecostalism. The materiality of incarnational theology in Catholicism and the materiality of pneumatological mediation in Pentecostalism provide a set of common assumptions about how grace intersects with nature, which means that very often Roman Catholics and Pentecostals are closer to each other than Pentecostals are to other Protestants. If this observation is puzzling, just consider how Roman Catholics and Pentecostals use oil to mediate healing, or how Pentecostals use handkerchiefs to mediate the anointing of the Spirit. Granted, it is not quite the same thing as “old bones” (aka relics), but the religious logic and spiritual intuition is pretty much the same. Pope Francis is an advocate of Spirit Baptism and has just set up a

new structure within the Roman Catholic Church called CHARIS as a vehicle for renewal and as a way of reaching out to Pentecostals and Independent Charismatics (CHARIS 2019). Perhaps this new structure will prove useful in Latin America, indicating where there is commonality and as a way of overcoming hostility based on a common experience of the Holy Spirit. This is what Andrew Chesnut has called a “preferential option for the Spirit” with its imitation of Pentecostalism’s adoption of the mass media including the production of TV soap operas for popular consumption (Chesnut 2003, 64, 94). Certainly, Roman Catholic Charismatic Renewal has proved popular in Brazil and has even produced celebrities such as Fr. Jonas Abib with his training centre in São Paulo attracting 550,000 people annually, or Fr. Marcelo Rossi, whose CDs, DVDs and exercise videos have sold millions of copies. However, once again, it seems that this kind of material spirituality, however packaged, is incapable of escaping a neoliberal cosmology whether in its Pentecostal or Catholic expression.

Second, Pentecostalism provides hope for the people. Pentecostalism is less about “pie in the sky when you die”, by which it is often caricatured. It is more about “on earth as it is in heaven”. It is concerned with realized eschatology rather than the far off and distant consummation of all things. The immediacy of God in the whole of life is a challenge when society appears to undermine that reality, which is why Pentecostals have traditionally provided alternative communities. People suffered the indignity of society with greater fortitude because there was an alternative reality, an alternative community, in which they were honoured, given dignity and respect, so they could cope with the world’s lack of care and love. They navigated the dissonance by means of a strong dualism. More recently, their posture has changed, instead of opting out, they are opting in. But instead of serving the poor, they desire to rule over them and manipulate them, like other religious traditions have done before them. They see themselves in less prophetic ways (standing apart) and instead entertain theocratic aspirations by means of political processes and a neoliberal cosmology. Arguably they (the fourth wavers) have placed themselves within the socio-religious marketplace and now play the “game” like everyone else and this, sadly, means that their politicians are also embroiled in corruption scandals (including the disproportionate number of UCKG politicians implicated in the so-called “bloodsuckers scandal” of



2006) (Freston 2013, 101; von Sinner 2012a, 107). Historic churches can only speak to these types of Pentecostals once they have examined themselves and asked whether they have led the way or not. Has the priestly service to the state given way to a more prophetic stance, or has it once again given way to the seduction of power (even if it is veiled)?

Third and finally, there is a role that the historic churches can play in relation to education. I invited a Pentecostal pastor and FaceBook friend from São Paulo to come to the IAPT conference but he said that he could not make it because he has a full time job. Many Pentecostal pastors and leaders have to work outside the church in order to make a living. They do not have the luxury of time and money to attend conferences and talk to theologians, even prestigious ones from around the world! Additionally, many of them are anti-intellectual and believe that “theologians” have lost both the plot and the Spirit, if they ever even “had” the Spirit in the first place. What would it take for the historic churches to set up opportunities for dialogue and build open and honest relationships? How can historic churches move beyond hostility to a place of mutual exchange? Hospitality is the key to conversation, so I thank our hosts for their hospitality to the Academy and I look forward to possible conversations between Pentecostals and the historic denominations in Brazil.

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