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NEO-PENTECOSTALISM AND GLOBALIZATION

On July 31, 2014, the "Temple of Solomon," the house of worship and world headquarters of Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God – founded and headed by "Bishop" Edir Macedo) will be inaugurated in São Paulo, in the presence of Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff. It will be the largest church in the city, covering an area equivalent to sixteen soccer fields, reaching twice the height of Rio de Janeiro's *Christ the Redeemer* statue, and seating 10,000 worshipers. It will be equipped with cutting-edge technology and will provide 1,200 underground parking spaces.

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The edifice has already become a "must" for a tour of São Paulo. It bears witness to the high profile of an Evangelical movement that can pride itself on "a steady global upsurge" (1) in the last fifty years, both in Latin America and around the world. However, while Evangelicalism (2) can "claim to be the liveliest sector in the developed Western world," it is not developing as fast as Pentecostalism – not so much classical, but neo-Pentecostalism. The latter considers that there is no point passively looking forward to the Second Coming of Christ: the Kingdom is already here, and what is needed is an active strategy of expansion and occupation, or even saturation, of the public sphere.

Neo-Pentecostal expansion, which is still more important than that of Islam, has compelled the scientific community to revisit the theory of a steady and irreversible secularization of modern societies to such an extent that it has come to underpin the desecularization thesis. Desecularization has been presented as a "rise of spirituality" or "resurgent religion," to draw on the titles of works by Harvey Cox (3) and Peter Berger. These former great theoreticians of secularization have confessed that they were radically mistaken in their interpretation and that the world now "is as furiously religious as it ever was."(4) It is in that context that neo-Pentecostalism has been presented as "the religion of the twenty-first century,"(5) and ultimately as the religion of the globalized world.

THE RELIGION OF THE GLOBALIZED WORLD

In a recent work, Peter Beyer states that "religion and globalization are historically, conceptually, and institutionally related."(6) Religion appears as both a "contingent expression of the historical process of globalization" and "one of the outcomes of the successive transformations and developments that have brought about contemporary global society."

(1) D. Martin, "The Evangelical Upsurge and its Political Implications," *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999, p. 37.

(2) "Evangelical" is a generic term used by most members of Protestant churches promoting the centrality of the Bible, justification by faith alone, and the need for personal conversion.

(3) H. Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Re-shaping of Religion in the 21st Century*, Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1995; Decapo Press reprint 2001.

(4) P. L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

(5) H. Tincq, "La montée d'un 'christianisme de conversion,'" Le Monde, April 1, 2002; "Le choc de deux fondamentalismes," *Le Monde*, April 1, 2003; H. Cox, *op. cit.*

(6) P. Beyer, *Religion in the Context of Globalization: Essays on Concept, Form, and Political Implication*, Milton, Routledge, 2013, p. 1.

There can be no doubt that religion is an indicator and the outcome of a transformational process affecting most contemporary societies. However, it also constitutes one of the privileged loci where the reorganizations brought about by this process take place.

These reorganizations weaken all the points of reference of social actors, who then mostly understand and experience them as a "crisis" – of which the global expansion of neo-Pentecostalism is both an indicator and a management tool. Indeed, Evangelicalism – as well as its neo-Pentecostal subdivision – does appear as a privileged recourse in the search for a new identity and the positioning of this reconstructed identity in a free-circulation world. Evangelicalism provides an appropriate site for the observation of new values in societies fashioned by a phenomenon with which it is said to share affinities. It also provides an invaluable indicator of the way in which these societies come to relate to pluralism – a pluralism of which it is an important building block. It universally tends to move openly from its status as a religious actor to that of a social, economic, and ultimately political, actor.

Religion's double function as indicator of and management tool for ongoing reorganizations can thus be analyzed along four narrowly connected lines:

- The production, via religion, of an individuation compatible with ongoing globalization processes; that is to say, the way in which new neo-Pentecostal community institutions tend to produce globalized individuals according to a fully integrated market logic.

- The handling, via religion, of the dynamic rearticulation of the individual-community-world relationship; the way in which loyalty and a new sense of community build up in connection with the social mobility brought about by religious practice.

- The establishment, via religion, of a renewed relationship to politics, according to a logic in which religion and politics no longer perceive each other as autonomous entities but constantly mix and interact within a locus characterized by the extreme fluidity of the circulatory movements that shape it.

- The establishment, via religion, of worldwide networks fostering the emergence of global actors bound in a complementary mutual relationship and practicing a deterritorialized religion.

PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

The reason that neo-Pentecostalism proves able to constitute a privileged locus for the transformation of societies is because it is in a position, everywhere, to provide an offer tailored to extant expectations. However, considering the radicalization of individualized relationships to the transcendental, it is also, if not most, likely to be

put to multiple and contradictory uses.

Thus, the widespread appeal of the neo-Pentecostal offering comes from the successful combination of merchant Christianity with a teleological approach to personal success wagered on efficiency theology, and conservative morality.

Merchant Christianity is not only about the privatization of religion – the Church being a private individual enterprise. It also involves, under the aegis and for the benefit of "religious" entrepreneurs (business-owning preachers), the constitution of holding companies making available a whole array of products and services – which for the most part do not center on the spiritual – as adapted as possible to the needs of a clientele that they make every effort to hold captive.

Neo-Pentecostalism prides itself on its particular proximity with the globalized world and its underpinning values. It thus remains to be seen whether it measures up to the social mobility it promises (and aims to make possible) and to the services it provides. Besides religious socialization, the thousands of Evangelical churches welcoming migrant populations from Africa, Asia or Latin America in European or North American suburbia help their congregations in many ways, including regularization of stay, job and home hunting, finding a spouse…(7)

It follows that individual enrichment constitutes the ultimate goal of the creation and development of a religious business as well as the objective pursued by the convert, and beyond that, it underpins the very legitimacy of that business.

Addressing the case of Nigeria, Obi Igwara has stated that religions of all faiths are above all big business and that the proliferation of churches primarily serves the interests of their leaders.(8) This is corroborated by Forbes Magazine's list of the richest pastors in Brazil (virtual issue of January 17, 2013): "Bishop" Edir Macedo, founder of *Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (also known as *Pare de Sufrir* [Stop Suffering]) is said to own a fortune estimated at 950 million dollars; Valdemiro Santiago, founder of *Igreja Mundial do Poder de Deus* (World Church of the Power of God) has amassed 220 million dollars; Silas Malafaia, leader of *Vitória em Cristo* (Assembly of God – Victory in Christ Church), is worth 150 million; R.R. Soares, founder of *Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus* (International Church of the Grace of God), 125 million; "Apostle" Estevam Hernandes and his spouse, "Bishop" Sonia, founders of *Igreja Apostolica Renascer em Cristo* (Reborn in Christ Church), 65 million.

The crux of the matter is how neo-Pentecostalists and their personal success teleology manage to have God subcontract salvation to the market – the latter being set up as the supreme arbiter and made sacred by religion. For therein lies the challenge of Prosperity Theology: it must turn the believer's material wealth into a token of God's kindness and a validation of his/her loyalty to God.

(7) See D. Mottier, Une ethnographie des pentecôtismes africains en France: Le temps des prophètes, *Espace Afrique,* vol. 11, Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia, 2014.

(8) O. Igwara, "Holy Nigerian Nationalism and Apocalyptic Visions of the Nation," *Nations and Nationalism* 1, 3, 1995, pp. 327-355.

The values promoted and sacralized by this religion clearly are the dominant values of the globalized world. The system has thus come full circle, and religion is but one point on the circumference of the circle. It does not lie at the origin of the system.

A POLITICAL ACTOR

In keeping with North American conservative neo-Protestantism, Prosperity Theology targets the individual rather than the community and construes poverty as a lack of submission to God leading to the impossibility of salvation. Indeed, if earthly riches belong to the Father, they first accrue to his Sons. By the same logic, divine election gives the believer access to the riches of this world. In other words, Prosperity Theology aims to change individuals, and this transformation will ultimately lead to that of society. Individual social advancement is construed as the only possible vector of social change in that it is made to legitimate the sought-for evolution by relating it to divine will.

Hence the stress on formatting individuals within the church's neo-community.

It is not surprising then that neo-Pentecostalism should claim to adhere to the use of religion as a tool for the renewal of politics. Its principles for action are explicit: doctrinal change as concerns the very conception of politics; application of the ecclesial model to politics in terms of both organization and growth strategy; strict morality, with norms internalized by the church's members and constituting the basis of the latter's "strong identity"; strengthened family cohesion; entrusting women with religious and political responsibilities.

These principles, formalized notably by Columbia's *Partido Nacional Cristiano* (Christian National Party), are common to the movement as a whole and likely to foster a "Christian nation" building project. This, for example, is the objective of *Fraternidad Cristiana de Guatemala* (Christian Fraternity of Guatemala). Its project, called "*La Nación para Cristo*" (Nation for Christ), aims to call on Jesus Christ "to transform the nation" (*para transformar la nación*). Another Guatemalan church, El Shaddai Ministries, has a program entitled "*Jesús es el Señor de Guatemala*" (Christ is the Lord of Guatemala). These initiatives reveal the neo-Pentecostalists' particular interest for constitutional reforms and their goal to subordinate the judicial system to biblical prescriptions. This leads to a threefold criticism of what is called "constitutional humanism," which is accused of obstructing the Biblical vision of the law; to the call for transferring the health and educational systems under neo-Pentecostal responsibility; last, to the revision and strengthening of laws relative to "social morality" (divorce, abortion…).

In the end, the expansion of neo-Pentecostalism thus signals (a) the pluralization of societies, (b) the renewal of axiological systems related to the accelerated trans-

formation of societies, and (c) the progress and effects of globalization.

It would nonetheless be unwise to see in this expansion the victory of a "neo-" over a "classical religion" or even a resurgent religion calling secularization into question. The most serious threat to the future of churches, whether new or traditional, could in fact come from societal evolutions. Addressing the legalization of same-sex marriage in Mexico City and Argentina and the concern it causes inside religious hierarchies, Marco Vicenzino has put forward the following idea: "As a matter of fact, despite the conflicts between them, Catholics and Pentecostalists alike may eventually see a common and major threat in the slow rise of secularism and atheism in Latin America […] All in all, one may observe a large convergence of interests for the political sphere based on a shared opposition to the growth of secularism."(9)

(9) M. Vicenzino, "America Latina: La Sfida dell'Evangelismo," *Religione e politica*, Aspenia 41-42, Jan. 2009, pp. 69-76.