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► To cite this version:

Nathalie Luca. Multi-Level Marketing: At the Crossroads of Economy and Religion. Emerald. Research in Economic Anthropology, 31, Emerald, pp.219-241, 2011, The Economics of Religion: Anthropological Approach, 978-1-78052-228-9. 10.1108/S0190-1281(2011)0000031012 . hal-03726594

HAL Id: hal-03726594

<https://hal.science/hal-03726594>

Submitted on 18 Jul 2022

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Multi-Level Marketing: At the Crossroads of Economy and Religion

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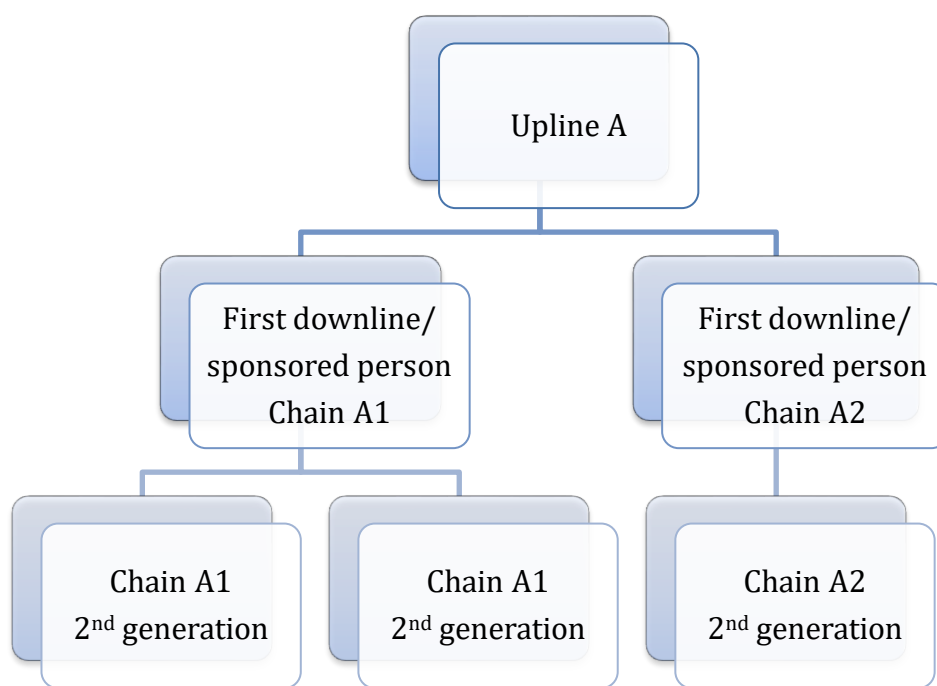
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Introduction

For some time, at least in France, certain economists until then little sensitized to religious issues have been appealing to/reaching out to sociologists of religion, puzzled by a new fact not clearly identified: the closeness/close ties between, on the one hand, certain corporate cultures and, on the other hand, values, a philosophy, an ethics, and even emotional practices borrowed from the religious. Admittedly, there are well-known business trends and banking systems whose links with Islam or with Protestantism in particular are clearly asserted. Furthermore, we all know that no religious institution can do without any relationship to the economy world. On the other hand, what is new is that companies too can feel the need to reconnect to the religious, even though this link had been broken. Indeed, some companies incorporate elements from one or several religious cultures, according to criteria that vary with the kind of identity [that] they seek to assert and with the country in which they are implemented/depending on the kind of identity [that] they seek to assert and on the country in which they are implemented. The peculiarity of this link questions afresh the secularization of institutions. Just as this process seemed to lead religious institutions to completely break away from the business world and its independent values and ends, some companies decide, in a renewed and innovative way, to get closer to/approach such and such religious or spiritual movement. This approach to the religious by these companies/this rapprochement is more or less conspicuous. It is characteristic of multi-level marketing (MLM). What is it about?

MLM, also known as relationship marketing or network marketing, is a direct selling method (generally involving in-home selling situations) that comes from the United States. It is nowadays quite popular throughout the world, in the so-called North (Northern Asia, North America, and Europe) as well as in the so-called South (Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Southeastern Asia). Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, it has also been experiencing a significant growth in Russia and even in China and in Vietnam. I endeavored to observe it mainly in Metropolitan France, in the French Antilles, in French Guiana, in Haiti, and in South Korea.

So, what is it about? MLM can be traced back to manufacturers of a quite varied range of goods (household cleaning products, leading technologies/high-tech products, telecom services, financial products, clothes, jewelry, cosmetics, housing, well-being very much in vogue nowadays, and so forth) designed to appeal to a wide set of potential customers from various social backgrounds. To sell their products, these manufacturers opt for networks of independent contractors, which form as follows: a distributor A grows his/her own business by fostering customer loyalty and by recruiting new salespeople. The latter are the distributor's "downlines", also known as his/her "[direct downline] sponsored salespersons/recruits". Each downline in turn sponsors other distributors, this repeated pattern forming the length of each network chain. When introducing him/herself, a distributor says that he/she belongs to A's network and to the Nth generation of chain A1.



Basic network structure

A company usually counts on several “uplines”. The more the downlines corresponding to each upline, the more the chains, and the more these networks can expect to grow, locally, nationally, and internationally. A distributor earns income from his/her own retail sales and from his/her downlines’ retail sales, either directly (when these recruits are the distributor’s downlines) or indirectly (in the case of the following generations). The perceived percentage out of which is paid the distributor decreases as the chain length increases.

I will focus here in particular on three points, which explain how I came to be interested in this topic, as an anthropologist specialized in religious issues and, more specifically, in controversial groups, commonly known as “sects”. The first point deals with the kinds of links that possibly exist between MLM companies and the religious, on the understanding that these links can evolve and can equally subside, disappear or become stronger, depending on the context in which they develop. The second point deals with the transnational development of these companies, which rests on cross-border networks. I will here limit myself to showing that the religious is not unrelated to the expansion capacity of networks/network expansion. Ultimately, the final line of thought refers to the criticism regularly addressed to MLM, namely its being akin to sects, which is very often related to the two other points previously mentioned.

1. From the Protestant ethic to compassionate capitalism

The rejection to which relationship marketing is sometimes subjected here and there/the occasional rejection of relationship marketing is not unrelated to its ambiguous connection to the religious. This link can seem incompatible with the logical economic

involvement of this activity. However, it is not as incongruous as it first seems. Max Weber associates the advent of modern capitalist economy, as developed in the West, with the Protestant Reformation that occurred in the 16th century (Weber, 1964: 50). According to him, Reformers' (and, more specifically, Calvin's) innovative conception of the relationship between Man and God had unforeseen consequences on the economic sphere. Thus, the "spirit of capitalism" originated in the Protestant ethic (other among things).

This "spirit" is reflected in some well-known adages: "Time is money"; "Credit is money"; "The good paymaster is lord of another man's purse"; "Money is of the prolific, generating nature" [that] Weber comes across in particular in Benjamin Franklin's writings. Thereby, he eventually pinpoints the work ethic peculiar to capitalism: honesty, punctuality, diligence, and frugality far removed from any hedonistic conception of life. Man's salvation, always uncertain, requires his labor, success being a sign of his election. According to Weber, this search for signs partly accounts for dedication to work, redefined as calling (*Beruf*). Behind the Protestant ethic, there is indeed Calvin's distressing doctrine of predestination, according to which God preordained Man's destiny once and for all. None of Man's deeds can revoke God's final and infallible decision: Man is either an elect or a reprobate, depending on God's choice. Only God, in His transcendence, knows the rationale for this choice.

But who could passively accept predestination? Something must somehow distinguish the elect from the reprobate. There must be some reassuring signs of one's election. For Reformers considered monastic life worthless and for professional labor had become central to Christian life, professional skills, the ability to distinguish oneself as a dedicated worker, and finally financial success in this earthly existence emerged as hints that one was indeed an elect. Therefore, capitalism would be the unforeseen result of an attitude consisting in believing in one's election. This would involve cultivating one's self-esteem, which only dedication to work and its positive effects seem able to reinforce. This attitude created a new kind of entrepreneurs, very determined and dauntless, who developed self-confidence because they believed and claimed to be elected. Self-confidence enabled them to overcome all the difficulties likely to hamper a success that would let them stand out from the crowd.

However, capitalist economy does not elude the secularization process. Soon, the fear of both predestination and its consequences on labor would slacken the spirit of capitalism. Soon, the link with the Protestant ethic would be broken. Soon, economy would suddenly seem out of control, which contributed to the creation of an extremely precarious world, ruthless and exposed to financial crises (Stiglitz, 2002). As Bourdieu states, it is only very gradually "that its specific *nomos* was asserted, as expressed in the tautology 'business is business'; that economic transactions ceased to be modeled on domestic exchanges and therefore to depend on family or social obligations ("Business is business"); and that personal profit, thus financial interest, emerged as the dominant principle"¹ (2000: 17). As burdensome sources of individual and collective misfortunes, crises are an additional cause for concern. The will to instill values and to enforce ethical behaviors on a deregulated business world permeates society, which tries to curb this

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Les structures sociales de l'économie*, Seuil, « Liber », Paris, 2000, p. 17

tendency, in a desperate attempt to restore Man to the center of capitalist conscience/center capitalist conscience back on Man.

There are of course several forms of resistance to this capitalism deemed inhumane. We focus here on the form of resistance on which MLM is based. It is characterized by the fact that it does not question the economic system, but endeavors to instill in it the values it gradually relinquished. Therefore, it is no coincidence that this particular form of resistance comes from the United States, where Protestantism has never ceased to be a social cement. Nor is it a coincidence that this attempt to reintroduce certain values appealed, at least for some time, to some updated Protestant precepts. The latter were considered able to contribute to a revised capitalism some would then call “compassionate capitalism”.

Compassionate capitalism was asserted by Rich DeVos, the co-founder of a leading relationship marketing company (which is therefore also among the most controversial ones). The notion is defined in his book titled precisely *Compassionate Capitalism. People Helping People Help Themselves* (Dutton, New York City, 1993). He first defines capitalism (which he equates with material welfare) as follows:

$$\begin{array}{c} \textbf{Material Welfare} \\ = \\ \textbf{Natural Resources + Human Energy} \times \textbf{Tools} \end{array}$$

According to him, capitalism races out of control because its tools only aim at profitability, with no respect for nature nor for human beings. He finds it unacceptable and believes that this trend can be reversed. Therefore, all levels have to be infused with compassion, which will restore nature and the individual to the center of capitalism. He then suggests tools able to respect both. Thus, he explains that “[c]ompassionate capitalists still want to make a profit, but they are determined that real profits come when the good of people and the planet comes first. ‘Profit’ made at the expense of human or planetary suffering is not profit at all.” (p. 10). The following equation illustrates his statement:

$$\begin{array}{c} \textbf{Material Welfare} \\ = \\ \textbf{(Natural Resources + Human Energy} \times \textbf{Tools)} \times \textbf{Compassion} \end{array}$$

To infuse this compassion, Rich DeVos resorts to a line of thought peculiar to prosperity theology, which is generally associated with what is called neo-Pentecostalism. Thus, the beginnings at least of MLM cannot be understood without discussing Pentecostalism. The latter was crucial in the sense that it enabled MLM to reach many Christian countries of the so-called South (Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America), but not exclusively (Luca, 2008; Fouchard, Mary, Otayek eds, 2005; Corten, Dozon, Oro eds, 2003 ; Corten, Mary eds, 2000; Corten, 1995).

Whereas Protestants saw financial success as a sign of election, a sign that could alleviate the anguish caused by the doctrine of predestination, Pentecostalism, on the other hand, found another way, apparently an even more definite one, to have proof of this and therefore to be reassured: the experience of God. It is characterized by the fact that it allows non-believers to personally and emotionally experience the presence of God: as a result of the Pentecost experience, the faithful directly feels the presence of the Holy Spirit and receives baptism with him (also known as “baptism of fire”). Furthermore, various spiritual gifts are bestowed on them (such as, for instance, the gift of healing or the gifts of speech [interpretation of tongues; speaking in tongues, prophecy]), which are concrete manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the faithful can ensure that God dwells in him/her. This explains why Pentecostals say “I know God exists” (meaning “I experienced God’s presence/put God to the test”) instead of “I believe in God”.

Prosperity theology does not directly pertain to Pentecostalism. Many churches even object to what they view as a manifestation of Satan. This is why prosperity theology is associated with the so-called neo-Pentecostal movement. However, it is directly linked to this notion of experience of God’s almighty power. While the elect can directly sense it [la notion? l’expérimentation ? la puissance divine?] (through speaking in tongues or through healing), it [mêmes questions ...] can also be observed through the blessings God grants to His children. God is not an unworthy Father and would not let His loved ones live in misery. Let us highlight here a change compared with the Protestant ethic: at the core of this matter of experience and proof no longer lies work, but the very fact of being rich . . . [Je ne comprends pas bien la fin de la phrase.] Somehow, prosperity theology considers wealth to be one of God’s blessings. This is why, when this belief is carried to extremes, some churches fallen into disrepute hold that he who do not become rich cannot view himself as an elect. Thus, in contrast to puritan Protestants’ austerity, it is recommended that one openly show off one’s wealth.

It then becomes easy to understand that prosperity theology has had economic effects as much unforeseen as those of the doctrine of predestination. It is actually extremely distressing for those who do not succeed in becoming rich. Therefore, they need to find something that helps them get by, something that elevates their lives in order to ensure that God is still there. But, most of the time, these churches reach out to the most deprived social classes, and even to the most deprived within these particular social classes. The latter do no longer expect anything from the traditional economic system, whose inhumanity they experience on a daily basis and which they view as a manifestation of Satan. Their salvations cannot come from there. This is obvious to them. They are excluded from/left out of the system. Therefore, they need something else; something that will enable them to experience God’s presence. They look for the arm with which God will elevate them. And one of these arms is MLM.

At least, this is how Roch DeVos gets back to the religious. However, thereby – and this is important – he also underlines the value of work: he never claims that money is easy to earn. His writings do not imply that money grows on trees. Nevertheless, his compassionate capitalism is based on prosperity theology. Somehow, and this goes far beyond his own company, MLM is seen by the believers as the arm with which God reaches out to His creatures and blesses them.

I do not intend here to summarize *Compassionate Capitalism*, but only to outline some of its essential ideas. First of all, DeVos acknowledges that capitalism sometimes failed and that these failures should be remedied. Thus, what is wrong is not so much capitalism itself as what it became, or to be more accurate, what it became when it dismissed its ethics and its Christian values. He explains:

“What we think about people matters a great deal. If we think of them as children of God, possessing a divine spark and having God-given worth, it follows that we ought to treat all people with respect and dignity. But if we think of people in a strictly material sense, devoid of any spirituality and gaining worth only through the State, then what happens? We need only to look at communist history to answer that question.” (p. 5-6)

Capitalism should therefore not follow this lead! Hence a watchword: love. That is, God’s love for Man, in whom He placed His own dreams, Man’s aims consisting in achieving these dreams, and not to forget or to gloss over them.

“God is waiting patiently for you to come home, to receive His gifts, and to take your place at your Creator’s beautiful table. We are created to dream. Our dreams, too, are created in the image of God’s dreams. Imagine what it will mean for you to begin to have the same kinds of dreams that your Creator dreams for you and for the planet. (...) Your dreams determine who you are and what you care about. The size of them determines the size of your soul.” (p. 22)

And he goes on: “We are loved by God and empowered by our Creator to see our dreams come true.” (p. 23)

Not only do we have to achieve these dreams (provided that, he specifies, they be not totally unrealistic and obsessive), but also to take into account the fact that the achievement of others’ dreams (also instilled by God) matters as much as our own. We will then know how to effectively love and help one another. This is where compassionate capitalism meets prosperity theology. Together, he claims, we can change and achieve all the dreams [that] God places in us. MLM is therefore just a way of attaining love and mutual aid, as well as making our dreams come true.

Once this link has been established, it is not surprising that MLM networks first developed among Protestants and above all among neo-Pentecostals. MLM surfed on the Pentecostal wave, wherever it was.

2. The role of Pentecostalism in the rise of and later on the challenge to MLM in South Korea

Western tourists who visit South Korea are often surprised by the Christian crosses that are to be found in every street of Seoul and in every town of Korea. More than 30% of South Koreans have supposedly become Christians between 1950 and 2000. The fact that Christianity – and in particular the different forms of Protestantism – has become so popular in this country is surprising, especially as the two superpowers surrounding it, China and Japan, have remained rather indifferent to this religion. The success of Christianity was initially linked to the need to rebuild a national identity widely

challenged by forty years of Japanese colonialism, immediately followed by a war that divided the country. It was then necessary to make sense of this rift. South Korean churches, like the US ones, did so by participating in the creation of a founding myth. According to this myth, South Korea was an elected country/a chosen land, where the ultimate battle against Satan – represented by communism and North Korea – was taking place. God's victory would be achieved through the fall of North Korean leaders and through the subsequent reunification of the two Koreas into one capitalist country. Again, there is here, at a national level, this need to produce evidence that South Korea was an elected country/a chosen land. This evidence would ease the pain endured by these families divided by a war to which they did not subscribe as well as by international political and economic interests that were far beyond them. Here again, their hard work provided sought-after evidence. To economically surpass North Korea, to become recognized as an Asian Tiger, to overcome poverty: all this proved that God was at work in this part of Korea. In this context, Protestantism offered South Koreans a way of making sense of the situation and being reassured, which helped them come together around new national borders (Luca, 2000). South Korea emerges as a US-inspired Christian state (Chung, 2001). The founding myth of the United States and their fight against communism permeated the republican values and practices that developed at that time in South Korea. Ultimately, the churches were able to convince South Koreans to accept the sacrifices entailed by the recovery process. Undoubtedly, this contributed to its spectacular rise: its economy grew by more than 8% per year from 1960 to 1990 (Lanzarroti, 1992).

Thus, Protestant churches partook in the South Korean economic modernization. But what was most remarkable was the zeal of one particular Pentecostal church, which has become one of the largest in the world. For it motivated Koreans to overcome poverty, for it enthusiastically supported the government's capitalist and anticommunist values, and for it championed pro-Americanism, the [Yoido] Full Gospel Church gained international recognition and reputation, especially throughout Christianized countries of Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. According to this church, the promise of success applied as much to the country as to the individual. He who eagerly went to church was supposed to become rich quickly. It was there that prosperity theology, which more or less pervaded the whole religious and economic life in South Korea, was most fervently preached. This church turned out to be a support to the South Korean State and to its political and economic dynamics, which enabled it to strategically take up residence in the political and financial district of Seoul (Luca, 2004). It was in this church that the success of MLM was most striking, although these companies are ubiquitous in Christian networks.

Since women had little access to the professional world, they became massively involved in MLM, which they discovered through their Christian networks and which was primarily aimed at them. In addition, the methods of proselytizing used by Pentecostal churches were very similar to the business methods suggested to these women: handing out fliers and magazines, talking about it on every occasion and everywhere, on subways, going from door to door, being close to one's neighbors. Thus, people could simultaneously engage in proselytizing and MLM, holding the Bible in one hand and the products in the other, without this being an issue for Koreans, let alone for the State. Koreans are all aware of this kind of company. Each of them bought some products and associated at some point with a Protestant distributor. MLM networks were widely

based on preexisting Christian networks. They could spread quickly within the Full Gospel Church owing to the variety of weekly activities where the believers met and, above all, owing to “home cells”: [female] members gathered at a member’s home in a very friendly and relaxed atmosphere. Owing to these home cells, networks meetings (as well as sales) could easily be carried out. Thus, the way in which the Full Gospel was organized greatly contributed to the growth of MLM. The housewives were pleased to be involved in a profitable activity that could be compatible with their faith in God’s blessings. Building these networks sometimes had cruel consequences on a woman’s couple, as soon as she started to enjoy it too much or to earn too much money. Such a situation was unusual enough to hurt her husband and therefore to lead to divorce. However, in most cases, the amounts earned remained modest enough to financially relieve the husbands without hurting their feelings.

Yet an event would deeply change the situation: the Asian financial crisis of 1997 (Stiglitz, 2002: 127). This crisis had an enormous impact on South Korea: everything in which at least part of South Koreans had believed for nearly fifty years suddenly fell apart. It hastened the challenge to the American capitalist model and questioned the rightfulness of the US involvement in Korean domestic affairs, whether military or economic (Badie, 1999: 135). Anti-American demonstrations became quite widespread. The numbers increased even more when South Korea got involved in the Iraq War, to which South Koreans were opposed. This was harmful to the image of Christianity, which then emerged as a quite burdensome legacy of the US involvement.

Furthermore, this crisis posed a challenge to the North/South duality postulate. Insofar as the proof of God’s election of the South was entirely based on financial success, this crisis suddenly shattered the ability of prosperity theology to make sense of the situation. Korea suddenly lost the beliefs that had contributed to its self-confidence and to its people’s motivation to strive for its economic success. The crisis signaled the end of the Korean exception: South Korea could no longer claim to be the elected country/chosen land. Consequently, proselytizing has become so discreet that Protestants, until recently so ubiquitous, deserted the streets.

This is not unrelated to what would occur to the first MLM companies so closely linked to Pentecostalism and to prosperity theology. They fell apart along with the Christian networks on which their businesses were based. Even worse, like prosperity theology, they were rejected. Accused of promising easy money, MLM was from then on regarded as a sect. This is all the more remarkable as South Korea, unlike France, is quite reluctant to use this term. But it seemed the best insult to express one’s disappointment. Unable to start over elsewhere, uplines were ruined. They were shut out. This chapter of History was closed.

Trapped companies did everything they could to break free from the Christian hold. They radically changed their approach to the network. They have been trying since then to start over. In fact, I attended the most ostensibly non-religious/secular meetings precisely in South Korea. No more thanking God, no more crying nor displaying strong emotions that could remind of the Pentecostal services. Self-control and professionalism are now crucial to proving that MLM companies serve economy rather than religion.

In 2009, I had the opportunity to attend a congress. There was a striking contrast between this congress and what used to happen before the crisis: no speaker used the term “dream”, nor did anyone give an extraordinary account of his/her success. One could feel how difficult it was to adapt to the new speech style. The speakers no longer had anything to talk about! Due to the detachment from Pentecostalism, nothing helped hold the audience’s attention. It was almost boring. Monotonous speeches were lulling the audience into sleep, which I have never experienced elsewhere. Although we should not hastily generalize this to all MLM companies, it seems, however, that they may have forgotten, as they professionalized, that distributors were not employees and needed therefore to be motivated in order to remain loyal. Companies face a new problem: What should they rely on? Who should they target? What should they rebuild their networks on? The solution is still pending. To the date, one cannot be sure that they will be able to recover, even though the crisis is over now and business is on again. A distributor told me that, in the course of the three years she had been involved in network marketing, she sponsored only one distributor. According to the accounts I gathered, this is why women end up quitting this activity: it has become too difficult.

However, it is interesting to point out that other MLM companies, until then much less well-known in Korea and therefore less criticized, are taking over quite successfully. They rely on new networks, more in tune with the current spiritual sensibilities of Koreans, in relation to New Age and Buddhism. But Koreans are much less aware of them. It takes more time to build these new networks. It seems that people still have trouble trusting this kind of system.

I cannot detail here the whole South Korean situation. Yet it helps me establish a general framework in order to understand how MLM evolves. The fact that nowadays Korean distributors suffer from being identified as a sect, whereas they have enjoyed a very good reputation for a long time; the fact that some of them were ruined overnight, not because of the economic crisis but because of the impact [that] the crisis had on how people perceived both prosperity theology and the religious networks on which their businesses were based; and, finally, the fact that companies that are nowadays recovering or being implemented not only dismiss the Protestant network within which distributors were initially recruited, but also look for alternative and less controversial networks; all these facts show how important it is to contextualize the situation in order not only to understand the periods during which MLM developed and then weakened, but also to realize how malleable these companies are. Their links with the religious depend on the situation, which means that these links cannot be broken for good. Furthermore, people are not necessarily shocked by them, nor do they mind them. They are not necessarily subjected to criticism. But when they start being criticized, the situation of MLM companies becomes more precarious for a certain time, a time during which they have to start over again, with new networks to rely on. They have to be able to adapt, by destroying, by reducing, or by altering their links with the religious. We will see that this is currently occurring in Europe, and especially in France, but it is not always possible. The exceptional case of Haiti, where I went twice prior to the earthquake of January 2010, also helps understand the link between MLM and Pentecostal networks.

3. MLM imported to Haiti: a story of failure

In South Korea like in the United States, American MLM companies emerged, at least initially, as the manifestation of God's arm, with which He provided wealth to the faithful. From the start, the situation of relationship marketing was more difficult in Haiti precisely because it did not succeed in partnering up with the local Pentecostal movements. Thus, it tempted the faithful away and ended up taking the place of the religious, professing a highly controversial prosperity theology. Consequently, after a spectacular rise (still difficult to quantify), MLM encountered some serious difficulties. During my survey in Port-au-Prince in 2008, hardly more than fifty people attended the meetings, but this still gives an idea of how it was when the network was blooming.

I tried to reconstruct the various evolution stages of relationship marketing in Port-au-Prince by studying in particular the religious and economic conditions in Haiti. Several points immediately came out. None of the Protestant churches [that] I visited, none of the ministers [whom] I interviewed, and none of the faithful [whom] I met identified with prosperity theology. It is difficult to say whether this is a sign of the French influence on this part of the island, but it seems that churches devalue money in their discourses. Quite on the contrary, Christian Haitians see the poverty and the suffering endured by their country as the very sign of God's election. Whereas, like the US, South Korea is based on free-market economy, capitalism, and prosperity theology, the Protestant and Pentecostal churches in Haiti, on the other hand, disparage "material blessings". None of the numerous parishes in Haiti seem to belong to neo-Pentecostalism (Corten, 2001; Hurbon, 2004). Those [that] I observed explain that ecological, social, and political misfortunes are God's blessings, reminding that Jesus was crushed before being sanctified:

"There is no fulfillment without wrench, [...] After humiliation comes sanctification, [...] Let's cheer this harsh world, because it enables us to open up our hearts and listen to His words!"

These parishes also see misfortune as a sign of the end of time and therefore encourage to await more or less resignedly the advent of the new millennium. "I would rather suffer more than lose my soul", as a prayer goes. This mindset/spirit is also to be found in the limits of economic growth: entrepreneurs are not ready to take too many risks. One should not be overzealous. One should not draw too much attention to oneself. One should not try to have more than necessary, this could only bring bad luck. Now, this inertia is precisely what the distributors in Haiti apparently want to oppose. An upline relied on a book by Haitian author Lionel Benjamin, a book quite meaningful in this respect: *Haiti 2004. La Révolution mentale, révolution finale* (Areytos, Pétion-Ville, Haiti, 2007). It starts as follows: "Think and speak nicely of Haiti. Haiti shall be a paradise." On the back cover, the following prediction: "The time of mental revolution, for Haiti, has come." Finally, there is also this comment:

"Lionel Benjamin puts forth a brilliant solution, peaceful and humane, in order to halt the decline of the first Black Republic in the world:
Change yourself
To change Haiti
To change the world."

The content of this book, as well as the Sunday meetings of distributor networks, are quite a watershed. They are diametrically opposed to the discourses of Pentecostal ministers. The latter encourage people to remain poor and resigned, as well as to turn to God, from whom they should expect everything. A religion of prosperity is actually being created here, a religion totally linked to US positivism and based in particular on Christian values. Before discussing products and network building, people pray and fervently thank God:

“Make us successful, Lord. Here, in Haiti, there is a lot of misfortune, but we want to overcome it, we want to achieve this dream of a better country.”

An upper-class Haitian distributor, who built a network based on a spirit of mutual assistance, told me:

“I took interest in this form of marketing because it’s the only way to show people that they can change their levels of conscience and change their lives. Their social conditions aren’t determined once and for all at birth. Some people who start with nothing can actually earn money. People aren’t aware of the power of the mind. It’s not only about education. It’s about what you have in there and what you believe in.”

MLM started in the 1980s and managed to gather more than a thousand distributors whose daily life radically changed. A florist told me:

“Thanks to this new job, young people learned to speak, to express themselves, to dress. Society doesn’t teach them that. It made them subscribe to certain values, without which this system does not work. Many of them, it’s true, didn’t make much money, but they would fight for something since they don’t have anything! They would wake up in the morning with a glimmer of hope nothing else had given them. That’s no small thing!”

This glimmer died out due to internal splits (between an upline and his/her network) and to external reasons, the main one being a sudden reform and its immediate effect on customs duties. Distributors used to import their goods from the United States. With the reform, customs held up their orders. The expiration date of certain goods expired; refunds had to be issued to the customers who did not receive their orders. Distributors ran into debt since they had to pay for the products that could not be delivered. This undermined the trust needed for MLM to work. Although the situation would afterward be regulated, the networks had fallen apart and the customs duties had become too high for the business to remain profitable. In short, with this reform, MLM lost its momentum.

Yet the accounts point out that some people are still willing to get involved in MLM, just because they miss the “magic” of the meetings so much. Although there is still a will and there is still hope, these networks are widely criticized within Protestant circles, including sometimes directly during religious service. A pastor explained to me:

“Some see these networks as a manifestation of Satan trying to seduce you, to lure you into sin, into a system that works for itself, not for you. This is the evil of the Beast. It’s all illusion, naivety, and deceitfulness. Many people were very

optimistic at first, but as time went by they became disappointed and hostile to it. They came back to us.”

For a short amount of time at least, people sensed that relationship marketing involved a serious risk in terms of competition. It is worth pointing out that not only were pastors approached, but they were also advised to “find new disciples”... quite a misleading turn of phrase! Another Pentecostal pastor told me that some of his colleagues chose to join MLM and were sometimes followed by their entire communities. He had also been tempted, but stood fast. Certain pastors even banned distributors from their churches. One of the ministers [whom] I interviewed concluded:

“We were born in poverty, we grew up in poverty, and we shall die in poverty.”

An upline replies to this by saying:

“MLM’s message is that poverty isn’t a condition. It isn’t a disease.”

Relationship marketing experienced a short-lived boom, but was mainly considered a sectarian activity, due to the importance granted to accumulation of wealth. Customs obstacles implemented by the State curbed this boom. The earthquake of January 2010 stopped it.

4. The professionalization stages of MLM in France: from being rooted in religion to being rooted in sports

The ability of MLM to develop in Metropolitan France and in the French overseas departments followed the same pattern as in the US, in South Korea, or in Haiti: at least initially, the companies tried to surf the wave of Pentecostal networks. It worked out in Guadeloupe, in Martinique, or in French Guiana, where there are many Pentecostal and Evangelical followers. Networks of distributors were quickly successful there. On the other hand, they made a bad start in Metropolitan France. People there do not go much to Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches, which are contested, criticized, and disliked.

Yet, in the 1980s, in France, as in the US, in Haiti, and in South Korea, relationship marketing Sunday meetings could start with a prayer. MLM did not necessarily encourage conversions in neo-Pentecostal churches, but it sensitized distributors to prosperity theology. Anyway, it should be noted that the concern over the link between prosperity theology and relationship marketing called forth (and continues to do so) the same kind of aversion as in Haiti. This is quite obvious in the criticism [that] it attracted. They are similar to those leveled by Haitian Pentecostal pastors. The latter were mainly afraid that the followers would desert their churches in order to join these devilish networks. The use of a religious discourse to deter candidates from swelling the ranks of distributors shows that MLM networks are based, at least in part, on a link with Evangelical and Pentecostal networks. The first ones recruit where the latter are most successful in proselytizing. Either they are powerful allies and strengthen one another, or they compete and weaken one another. Les deux illustrations qui suivent, trouvées sur des sites internet évangélistes français, montrent très bien l’angoisse provoquée par ces offres considérées de diaboliques. (mettre la traduction des textes en bas de page ?)

blogdei



Pourquoi des pasteurs utilisent leurs
fichiers religieux pour contacter des gens
pour vendre “sous” eux ? Oui, pourquoi ?
Le blog de l'évangéliste Michelle d'Astier de la Vigerie



However, criticism came not only from these Evangelical [Protestant] circles. French society was widely suspicious of these companies, insofar as they questioned the values related to laicism/secularism. In France, people hardly stand a secular sphere of activity being closely linked to the religious (Luca, 2004b; 2008). This confusion/blurring of boundaries immediately stirs up suspicion and rejection. From this perspective, it is not surprising that one of the most publicized scandals in France dealt with the conversion of French distributors to Pentecostalism. In 1994, the media related baptismal immersions performed on distributors in Arizona, in a Pentecostal church affiliated to the Assemblies of God in Phoenix. These distributors' trip to the US was meant as a reward for their excellent sales figures. The pastor who officiated the baptisms was the network founder's brother! The scandal drew attention to a company that, besides, violated certain ethical, fiscal, financial ground rules, which led to its dissolution. What sensitized the French public opinion was the denunciation of the religious link, rather than the established tax frauds, which speaks volumes.

Thus, the newspaper *L'Express* publishes the following speech, given by a distributor high up in the network hierarchy at a congress of the accused company, as a proof of sectarianism:

"We were bound to meet again in this room. Since long before we were even born! I know there are people here who suffer because they don't know how to clear their debts. They think the Business is taking too long... But Joan of Arc once said: 'Only God will give the victory!' [Dans la citation originale, et donc dans la traduction anglaise de celle-ci, 'seul [Dieu]' n'apparaît pas. Dans la traduction anglaise de la citation originale, 'the [victory]' n'apparaît parfois pas.] God will help you cope with this, shoulder the burden... Let's entrust Him with all our dreams! (...) Let's hold hands now and receive Communion all together. Lord, please, bless our organization... Amen!" (François Koch and Renaud Leblond, *L'Express*, September 8th, 1994).

Belief in predestination; faith in God's will to deliver the elect from poverty; belief that our dreams were placed in us by God... Rich DeVos's influence on this speech is striking. This scandal tarnished the reputation of all the MLM companies and had a huge impact on their later growth in France. Legislators had already looked into the legality of this system. Laws had been passed so that the profession could be better supervised and, as a result, so that it could enjoy a better recognition. But the whole profession actually realizes how important it is to strengthen both its ethics and its professionalism in order to avoid falling into disrepute again. We can say, eventually, that this scandal gives fresh impetus to MLM. I do not have time here to provide a detailed account of the steps through which relationship marketing was ultimately able to grow in Metropolitan France. However, one step in particular is quite important.

We saw that, in order to silence rumors of sectarianism, South Korean companies broke their links with Pentecostalism. But, without a belief that could back up the faith in success, it was difficult for them to figure out how to address their distributors appropriately. The mere professionalization of the system is obviously not enough for

the business to work out. However, in France, relationship marketing found a discerning support perfectly suited to the French and European contexts: sportsmanship.

Thus, MLM assumes a position within the more general context of “sportivization” of the Western way of life. At first, when the religious ceased to oversee all fields of activities, due to secularization, science took over. This was then referred to as a transfer of transcendence. Later on, science ended up being attacked from several sides. It was the beginning of the counterculture. Ultimately, according to sociologist Alain Erhenberg’s analysis, it seems that sports have supplanted science as regards its capacity to affect all fields of activity.

Indeed, Alain Ehrenberg observes that sports have become an object of exceptional infatuation, which he associates with their ability to embody, for the majority, the democratic ideals of equality and justice: no more class-based differences and no more privileges of birth. Everyone starts from scratch and is offered a chance, even if not necessarily in the same sport. Anyone can find a sport that fulfils him/her, if he/she tries hard enough. The moves to learn, the efforts and the constraints, the qualities and the attitudes to develop are the same for everyone. Sports are “the very image of equal merit/equality by merit” (p. 43) and, as a result, are considered to be “the school of life” (p. 39), able to inculcate in everyone the mindset/spirit that will lead to success, in one’s professional as well as social and private life. Indeed, this mindset/spirit goes far beyond the mere practice of sports. It is prized in all the fields of activity, for it holds the values based on which action is possible. Between individual sports, extreme sports, combat sports, and team sports... There is a whole range of merits to acquire, which can easily be mobilized, even only metaphorically, to describe the kind of attitude that fosters individual or collective progress and that improves individual or collective skills. Companies realized that they could turn sportsmanship into a tremendous ally. Indeed, MLM is not alone in resorting to its potentialities.

Thus, catchy sports references now supplant religious references in the various congresses I attended, thereby motivating distributors. Most companies I visited have their own “sports ambassadors/representatives”. Top-level athletes’ involvement is even presented as a sign of their ethics. One of the members of the French team that participated in the 1998 World Championship explained at a congress:

“Our dreams are our goals: I have dreams, we all have dreams. Let’s remember that. Let’s not be afraid of ... [Je ne comprends pas bien la fin de la phrase.]. More leads to more.”

Indeed, how can one become a champion if one did not dream about it, if one did not believe it? Even once prosperity theology has been rejected, the reference to dreams does not disappear. It is now simply based on something else. I could give many more examples. Like this very famous French rugby player, who broke his knee and had to start again from scratch. He learned to walk again and later on to jog. Eventually, he learned to run again. Or like this renowned one-legged rock-climber.

After hearing such accounts, how can one claim that success does not depend on will and persistence? Such examples immediately empower people as regards their destinies. Unable to seek God’s blessings and having renounced the welfare state, we still have to

discover the god supposed to dwell in us, whatever his name. We want to believe that a full success kit is nestled within each of us. It is entirely up to us to use it. Up to each of us and to the group, which is the plural of “each of us”, no more no less, and which shares the same values, symbols, will to win, and above all which also places a high priority on facing problems together, reaching out to the weak, and helping them get back on their feet so as to move on together. It is beautiful. It is powerful. Yet such a responsibility is quite something. It is even likely to be quite a burden... But unity makes it seem less burdensome. Undoubtedly, these are very convincing arguments, which can spur on the energy necessary to start MLM entrepreneurial businesses and keep them going.

In the nearly three years of my survey in Metropolitan France and in the French Antilles, I did not notice at the meetings any direct comment on the religious, like those Rich DeVos’s disciples would make. People still thank God, which reminds what the networks are based on. I would not go as far as to say that the religious is now totally absent from the motivation system used in Metropolitan France. People do not speak of it and yet one can sense it. It is as if it remained within the orbit of MLM. MLM did not completely rid itself from religious references within compassionate capitalism, but it relinquished the religious institutions and the theologies to which it was originally attached. It has assumed its independence, perhaps has even found its cruising speed.

An evangelical distributor from French Guiana, originally from Metropolitan France, who had joined a French MLM company, told me that she had deeply felt this link with the religious during two congresses I had attended and during which, however, no religious or Christian references had been made. Once in orbit, the link with the religious can only be sensed by those who can recognize it due to their cultures or due to their personal religious affiliations:

“When I attended the congress, the first year, I said: ‘Well, well! This sounds familiar!’ And since this year, I’m sure of it. There’s this sentence, which I’m going to quote, that comes directly from the Bible: ‘The Lord said that you are the light of the world. You do not light a lamp and put it under the table. You put it on a bushel so that it gives light to all in the house.’ This year, at the congress, I hear: ‘There’s no point in shining unless you bright someone up.’ It means exactly the same thing! Today the sick no longer needs to be sick. He doesn’t need to live in misery. No! Jesus died for this! He came to save the world. The first time I made the connection, last year, I was a young evangelist. I said to myself: ‘No, stop it, you see God everywhere.’ But this year, I’m sure of it.”

Breaking this link with the religious was a deliberate move, politically thought-out and orchestrated both by the leaders of MLM companies and by the French direct selling federation. The latter considers it an absolute prerequisite for approving a company’s membership application [acceptation de la demande ? admission ?]. Thereby, the institutional leaders jointly contribute to the professionalization of what had trouble being recognized as an actual profession. Ethical codes and a restrictive normative system are nationally implemented and start to impact on the stances taken by European federations. MLM is changing in order to adapt to the French secular context. It associates the distributors’ attitudes to a new content of belief that amounts to the cult of performance embodied by sportsmanship.

Conclusion

In the US, South Korean, Haitian, and French cases, the growth of MLM companies resulted – at least in part – from the beliefs that they came across. The trust in this business model depended on the context, the content, and the attitudes of local beliefs. To understand how the reception of MLM varied from one country to another, we had to make a distinction between these three levels and to determine their degree of compatibility and how this compatibility evolved.

The **context of the belief/belief context** represents the way in which a country sees and defines itself: what it wants or believes at a certain point; what its citizens identify with. It corresponds to a set of shared values: a founding myth, a political ideology, a relationship to religion, a sense of belonging to a chosen or a damned land... All this makes up the context of the belief. It corresponds to the symbolic borders of a country. Due to their transnationalization policies, MLM companies are faced both, at the synchronic level, with different national contexts (Protestant land, secular land, and so forth), and, at the diachronic level, with the evolution of national symbolic borders (for instance, a shift from pro-Americanism to anti-Americanism).

As for the **content of the belief/belief content**, it varies with the context. As a result, content tolerated in a capitalist, Protestant, pro-American country will have trouble getting implemented in a communist, anti-American, or secular context... They can be incompatible, in which case beliefs seem sectarian. To avoid this stigmatization, MLM companies have to adapt and adjust to the country and to the time frame.

Finally, **belief attitudes** are what is most stable. In each country, the same rules are taught. This is even referred to as duplication. For a business to be successful, one has to assume the right attitude, perform the right actions, make the right speeches... This is why people can have the impression that relationship marketing creates standardized individuals. But it is a misconception, for their acts are related to specific belief contents, depending on particular belief contexts. Distributors cannot necessarily understand one another from one country to another. What motivates a sponsored distributor in France might prove inefficient in another country.

The following equation should be taken into account to calculate MLM companies' growth potential:

$\begin{array}{c} \text{National growth potential of MLM} \\ \\ = \\ \\ \text{National context of belief} \\ + \\ \text{Tolerated collection (or contents) of belief} \\ + \\ \text{Usual attitudes (or acts) beliefs} \end{array}$

In the US Protestant **context**, these companies want to embrace a new spirit of capitalism that shifts to the religious. This shift involved adopting a **collection** of beliefs related to prosperity theology, which associated the distributors' material success with an attitude of trust in God and later one in one's sponsor, an attitude of love and emotional generosity, integrity, effort and persistence in one's work as well as resistance to ordeals. All this worked out quite well in South Korea too, until the Asian crisis questioned the pro-American and anti-communist **context** favorable to Protestantism and in particular to Pentecostalism. This change of context involved invalidating the **collection** of beliefs in God's election of the South, based on which distributors could believe in their material success, which therefore rendered incongruous the attitude based on which they developed their networks. An adjustment period was necessary so that the belief attitude characteristic of this kind of company could again rest on new contents of belief related to a new context of belief. Indeed, South Koreans are nowadays very attracted to the religious movements coming from Northern Asia, which are rooted in their history and focus more on a Buddhist philosophy of life. Thus, when the context of belief is not or no longer suited to Christianity, these companies have to borrow from the religious sphere a collection of beliefs more suitable. In France, the secular **context** forced companies to leave the religious sphere and to rest on a new **content** of belief. The latter rested, *in fine*, on the cult of performance that derives from sportsmanship and that enables to profess the importance of dreams to success. Eventually, it seems that MLM is based on a set of attitudes, acts, or practices identical everywhere, but that both its survival and its potential growth depend at least in part on its ability to link these practices to collections of beliefs that vary with the national cultural contexts in question.

To conclude, what do we learn from MLM about the potential link between economy and religion? We learn that this link is made up of times of exhaustion, pause, slowdown, and then acceleration or reversal of the shift between the two spheres of activity: it is made of fluctuations and adjustments. It is never set. This link can only be defined by observing this movement, which varies in particular with the social environment. It can therefore not be defined once and for all.