Local Actors, Global Actors: The Neo-Pentecostalists in Central America

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Abstract:
This paper analyses the interactions of networks in connection with the modes of functioning of the neo-Pentecostal churches. From these interactions emerges the central figure of the minister, who articulates the local, transnational and global dimensions in a specific manner. Due to these networks the central actor – the minister – is in a position to incorporate into this mechanism all external contributions centred around these networks. Beyond the person of the minister, the articulation of the local and the global and their resulting redistributions constitute the centre of the analysis of the research carried on in different Latin American countries (in particular, Guatemala).

This paper focuses on some of the major effects of the process of privatization of religion, such as it has taken place, in particular, in the field studied here, namely South America, and knowing that what is at stake on the religious field is in fact the expression of (and accompanies) transformations taking place at other levels: in other words, religion has been privatized at the same time as the telephone, the service sector, or even the State. On a background of globalization in which a transfer of logics from the global to the religious can be seen, we have left a para-public management of the religion to enter a private management of religion. Considering the effects induced by this privatization, we will look into the network interactions as related to the operating modes of the neo-Pentecostal churches. What emerges from these interactions is the central figure of the minister, who articulates the local, transnational and global dimensions in a specific way. Thanks to these networks, this actor is in a position to incorporate all the exterior contributions conveyed by the networks into the mechanisms that he implements. But beyond the figure of the minister, it is the very articulation of the local and the global and the resultant reorganization which will be analyzed, the fields that have been kept for our analysis being the different South American countries (and more particularly Guatemala).

Neo-Pentecostalism and its logics

The progressive increase in power of neo-Pentecostalism represents a noteworthy indicator of the deregulation phenomena affecting the traditional systems in Latin America, both on the cultural, religious or institutional levels. It simultaneously represents a modality of closely finalized reconstruction of the social. It must be stressed that unlike the traditional Catholic system, what is being implemented here also aims at controlling individual activities, which Catholicism, although it pretended to encompass all the social issues, had not managed to implement. Latin American societies have been historically structured by the wild logic of an

organization of all the social issues via religion, this logic being centered on a territorialisation based on the parochial structure. This logic has undergone several adjustment from the Conquest to nowadays, from the figure of the natives being rescued from the Devil to the inculturation of the Gospel[1], via popular religion (Vatican II) and the Indian theology of the conference of the Latin American episcopate[2]. Within this framework, identities have been built by combining the management in the social space through an eccentric religiosity and the permanency of pre-Hispanic representations and practices. It is the latter which, until today, have tended to manage the private sphere, and thus individual activities (family relationships, illness and death management, the symbolic systems linked to production, to land, etc.). This system was to last until the 1950s, when it entered into a crisis, following the exhaustion of what had constituted its organizing principle so far. There are numerous reasons behind this: a demographic growth at the origin of the rural exodus, the beginning of an openness to market principles, the loss of influence of the State as well as of the political parties. The fragmentation of traditional institutions is the most visible when the system of kinship and authority is considered: as the family network did not seem to guarantee family support, the individual was increasingly forced to try to enlarge his/her belonging networks well beyond the sole family structure. This context was bound to be the vehicle of a radical questioning of the influence and the ascendancy of the Catholic church, so much the latter seemed to be closely linked to a traditional structure of which it constituted the linchpin. The dislocation of these classic collective forms of constitution of a worldview leads to enter into a world fundamentally characterized by circulation. And as a result by a new relation to space that is characterized by deterritorialization.

This evolution brings about a phenomenon of adjustment, staging the new forms of management, via religion, of the deregulation of the traditional system. As Latin America is also an area of "natural" diffusion of the North-American model, the situation was marked by a massive commitment of missionaries and financings. It is on this basis that Pentecostalism has had an exponential development: in 1900 the Evangelicals were estimated to oscillate between 200 and 300 hundred thousand; they were 21 million in 1980, 46 in 1990, and between 80 and 90 in 2000. In other words, around 12% of the South American population would be evangelical. In Guatemala[3], some recent statistics have fixed the number of protestants around 40% of the population. In Chili the figure would be 25% and almost 22% in Salvador[4]. Then came Brazil, where this rapid development has been most spectacular: 4 million in 1960, 8 million in 1970, 15 millions in 1980, 26 millions in 1990 and 35 in 2006 (that is 20% of the population). In Nicaragua[5], the figure would be about 16% of the population, in Panama about 15%.

The beginnings of this development took place at the start of the 20th century. But it was in the 1960s that the movement soared. Pretending to be "the Protestantism of modernity", Pentecostalism first and foremost targeted the most underprivileged social layers and the Indian world. In the seventies, a renewed form of Pentecostalism appeared ; hence the expression "neo-Pentecostalism" to designate a denomination which, from then on standing firm on a post-millenarianism (unlike pre-millenarianist Pentecostalism), was to make every effort to define new ways to "discipline society", among other things through the re-articulation of family systems, this time targeting the middle classes and at the bourgeoisies[6]. While the Pentecostals considered that the establishment of the Kingdom depended on the

second coming of Christ and that, in the meantime, one had to withdraw from the world, governed by Satan, for the neo-Pentecostals, the Kingdom of God is already of this world and Christians must consequently work so that, at the second coming of Christ, the world is already His. Therefore society must be changed: constitutions and laws must be changed so that they become the reflection of biblical doctrine. One of the means to achieve this is to occupy the spaces of power. On the other hand, wealth and health are being legitimized as a result of divine blessing, in reference to Calvinism. Most of the believers belonging to the middle class and the bourgeoisie are justified by the political participation and the exercise of power[7]. Neo-Pentecostals object to the defeatist eschatology of the Pentecostals an eschatology of victory, whose foundation is the belief in a historical continuity between the day the Holy Spirit revealed Himself to the Apostle and the Last Judgement. Convinced that God delegated his power[8], his authority[9], his sovereignty[10] and his domination[11] to them, they carry on strategies of "conquest of the world and nations" in order to win them to the Kingdom.

Latin American neo-Pentecostalism has been deeply influenced by North-American Protestantism. On the one hand, this influence has developed within the evangelical movement, and on the other it has contributed to engender new institutions. As far as the first logic is concerned, we can mention the World Congress on Evangelism which took place in Berlin under the patronage of Billy Graham (1966) and which was at the origin of the Latin American Congress of Evangelization (CLADE I and II). As far as the second logic is concerned, we will mention *el Movimiento del crecimiento de Iglesias* (Church Growth Movement) and the International Spiritual Warfare Network[12]. A third logic occurs, carried by the interests and strategies of the dominant social groups (the middle class, the bourgeoisie, the oligarchy and the military), due to their search for an ideology that would legitimize their domination and justify their social status. The need felt by these groups to take over social and political spaces represents a real turning point as far as the historical forms of representations and symbolization of politics are concerned, thus inducing new forms of participation and commitment[13]. Neo-Pentecostalism has generated a transformation of the doctrine (with the development of the "theology of prosperity and health") as well as a transformation of the referents and of the strategies of conversion of social groups: it is at the urban level and among the middle and upper class groups that their action has developed. The " pentecostalization[14] " of certain sectors of the historical Protestantism and of the Protestantism of sanctification is also a fact that has to be taken into account, since the modalities of interference and social policy happens to be, as a consequence, deeply reoriented.

The minister: local actor, global actor

Neo-Pentecostalism brings along the transformation of the institutional nature of religion, of the ideological content of the doctrine, of the administrative systems and, above all, of the role of a new individual *leadership* verging on the cult of personality and articulated into networks. Its actors are the local ministers, formed in the United States, who set up on their return new types of churches, speaking to the middle class and the bourgeoisie. The scene of their first reunions were the meeting rooms of luxury hotels where the groups concerned found the appropriate « conditions » for the demands of their social status. These ministers practice new forms of proselytism by « saturation », due to an intense use of the media, to the multiplication of meetings, to regular activities differentiated according to age groups, family groups, etc. This

activity triggers off an accelerated processes of conversion. Besides, this demographic growth is accompanied by the constitution of a critical financial mass thanks to the « tithe » and to the donations allowing to buy lands and build churches that can contain several thousand people. It is what can be observed from the 1980s onward. It is the case in Guatemala of the *Fraternidad Cristiana*, of the *Iglesia El Shaddai*, etc. One of the major characteristics of neo-Pentecostalism lies in the massive development of independent churches, which is at the origin of the determining function assigned to the minister. In the new logic of an independent church, the central actor of the privatization of religion is de facto the minister. He owns the institution and infrastructures as well as he produces meaning and organizes the relationships. These independent churches, thinking of themselves as unique, pretend to represent the totality of the religious phenomenon and give themselves the world as the place of their action. They encompass the whole society as a space of mission. Hence the extraterritoriality and the universality they demand. Hence the importance granted to the conversion process.

René Padilla, the Executive Secretary of the Latin-American Theological Brotherhood, is Ecuadorian, and it was in Quito that the Brotherhood of May 24th 1977 gathered thirty leaders from nine of the continent's countries to "draw a portrait of the Christian leader for Latin America"[15]. The meeting was co-sponsored by MAP America Latina, Overseas Ministry Studies Centre (OMSC) from New Haven (Connecticut) and the Christian Network of Integral Transformation. It also represents a new effort to strengthen political processes through "the elaboration of the model of leaders that is needed in the region". Two interventions had been prepared and considered as central: that of Chilean Oscar Pereira, a founding member of the Latin-American Theological Brotherhood, who spoke on "The biblical models of leadership" and the one of Julio Carlos Cevalios on "Theological education in Latin America". After claiming that the model of leadership must be biblical and that the model is Christ's, the participants noticed that in practice, one has to propose, with a Latin American outlook, new models of education and urbanization, in order to identify the current social problems and to help transform the internal structures of the church and "*those,* exterior*, of society, which limit the efficiency of the Kingdom of God"*. A specific Latin American model of leadership has been asserted, which is supposed to take into account "the great changes and challenges taking place in the world". This "clean model" of leader must break away with contemporary practices characterized by imported models, which are "minister-centred", imposed by higher hierarchies, out of context, caudillist, and are no longer adapted to the social reality. Aware of their limitations, the participants have asked the MAPA Latin America and to Overseas Ministry Studies Centre (OMSC) that they "play the role of stimulants" for the emergence of this new leadership.

The churches that came into being in the second half of the seventies were produced by the process of globalization, which means that they were, from the start, the vehicle of the ideology, the values and institutional forms coming from management, from the new techniques of communication, and more generally, from the development of the logic of the market. This new modes of organization and institutionalization are characterized by hierarchical autonomy, the new role of the minister-*leader*-owner and the integration into networks. Neo-Pentecostalism transforms the institutional nature of religion, the ideological content of the doctrine, and the systems of administration. It emphasizes a new individual *leadership* verging on the cult of personality and articulated into networks. In this general economy, the minister stands as a global, universal actor, as every neo-Pentecostal church must

be missionary. In other words, as it is the Kingdom of God, it has to get involved in its universal expansion and influence. To do so the neo-Pentecostal minister, who is autonomous and independent, tries to give himself the means to achieve global efficiency. The structure of the institution is simple and is based on the principle of reducing the staff, which is appropriate to the logic of competitiveness. The neo-Pentecostal church is consequently and above all a family business : the wife is associate minister, some of the sons too ; others have under the minister's care the responsibility of some church activities (radio or television station or programmes, conducting the church's orchestra, etc.). By thus involving his family, the minister prepares his succession and the handing over of his patrimony. Besides, these neo-Pentecostal churches recruit "associate ministers", collaborators who are in charge of concrete activities (the coordination of different groups of believers**:** children, young people, women, couples …) but without a decision-making power. These collaborators are on a payroll, and are likely to remain so their whole life or to go and create their own church or ministry due to the skills they acquired at the office they occupy. Becoming in turn minister-owner, they stop being on a payroll. The role and status of the minister in neo-Pentecostal churches sharply contrasts with the situation that can prevail in other churches. These churches have a weak degree of bureaucratization. The minister-owner cannot allow charisma to become a routine, as Max Weber understood it, because these churches fall within the framework of a strong competition. The minister-owner embodies the charismatic dynamics of his Church, which implies that he constantly has to take initiatives, or he will see his congregation abandoning the church. This logic entails that the dynamics of growth is based on breaks: the more breaks, the better, for more than one actor is involved, more ministers emerge, more institutions come into being.

In the churches' development, the central element of institutional consolidation goes to the finances, the tithe and the offerings constituting the congregation on basis of this growth. On this depend the power and influence of the minister-owner, the constitution of a patrimony and the social visibility of the institution. This is obvious in Guatemala, where at the end of the 1990s, nearly thirty national churches were involved in the development of "mega-churches", in the construction of places of worship that could take in very large groups of believers. The "Casa de Dios" church, recently inaugurated in the capital, can thus seat 4,600 persons. Another one, whose construction cost US$ 4,5 million, can take in 7,000 persons. A third one, the Mega-Frater, has a capacity of 15,000 people and will cost more than US$ 48 million. We can find the same phenomenon with the development of the media: the "Iglesia Familia de Dios", in addition to the construction of its temple with a capacity of 9,000 people, which cost US$3,5 million, also had built, for its television channel (Canal 27) a building that cost more than US$3,6 million, not to mention the necessary technical equipments to the production and the broadcasting of programs.

The minister in order to give a boost and a visibility to his institution must also fit into global networks. This resort to networks is becoming a component of the institutional logic, for it is at the same time the place where himself and his institution are legitimized. Moreover, this belonging allows him to systematically include prestigious global actors as actors of his local community. Indeed, he can recruit for specific activities such some prestigious orator to attend the service of his church or to take part in more one-off activities (Congress…). This integration into networks allows the local minister to be in turn invited and therefore to become a global

actor. Based on relations of interdependence these transnational networks have been developed by a new generation of leaders. As David Cannistraci[16] points out, the network is "essentially a grouping of autonomous churches and of individual ministries that voluntarily get united into an organized structure. This working environment of human relations is sufficient to facilitate the interdependence between the members of the working network and its apostolic supervision". The terminology used in this description ("autonomous", "voluntarily", "relations", "interdependence", "supervision") stresses the true nature of the networks observed on the field. These networks are "translocal" and transnational, which means that their members are not found in areas of internal competence. They are based on "relationships" determined by interdependence, which implies a recognized and voluntarily accepted hierarchy; in other words, these are structures created "by a new generation of *leaders*[17], who are aggressively involved in relations of pact"[18]. With the *leader* – who is often considered to be an "apostle"[19] - the members of the network have relationships of confidence; hence the idea that the organizational structures are based on trusting one person and not "teams", "committee" or "councils". It is this "trust" which helps the network grow or fade. The network is thought as a service structure: "it serves and does not control". Consequently it is the local church, and not the network, which is the vehicle of legitimacy; thus the local churches as a whole are granting legitimacy to the *leader*. Considering that affiliation is voluntary and that the structure is mobile, the persons in charge of the network would take the risk, if they tried to use it, to scupper their chances and to be excluded from the network, since the local churches are their strength. This means that the network must always have the capacity to offer services, and it also means that they constantly have to take the initiative. Dick Iverson[20], the founder of *Ministries Fellowship International*, clearly brings up these new logics of articulation and institutionalization when he claims, in the presentation of his institution: "We have committed ourselves to do what had to be done to maintain our fellowship in the network and avoid any type of controlled hierarchy. We are not opposed to titles nor to those who hold them (…) yet our personal belief is that a central seat must not dictate the policy of our local churches. Each church must be autonomous; the ministers can enjoy the security of a significant responsibility but also see their *leadership* verified and assessed".

The network is thus thought as an articulation of local churches, without a hierarchy and autonomous, which remains, for many officials, the best method against the "general routinization of charisma". The goal is to achieve a network of networks, in which the churches and the local institutions could be articulated according to their sensibilities but also to their evolution throughout time; being able to enter and to exit freely by taking back the initiative: at any given time, the local church may be interested in the thematics and dynamics of some other network, then its evolution may drive this church to take interest in other themes dealt with in another network; then this new network will supply an added value to the development of the institution. The network thus continually revives the dynamics and guarantees the institutional privatization of religion, insofar as the leader-minister-owner acquires a central role: he is the guarantor of the presence of his institution in the network on the one hand, and of its mobility and its adaptability to changes on the other.