

Prosperity theology: on the meaning of material success in contemporary urban Brazil

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Abstract:

Since the 1990s "productivity" and "results" have taken center-stage on Brazil's economic discourse. Throughout this period the number of Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus faithful has skyrocketed among the poor. This church promises a worldly existence of "abundance" to those paying the "tithe" and demanding from the Lord a "structure to fight for life". Using ethnographic material culled from Pentecostal faithful, this paper establishes the connection between both processes.

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During its first years of existence, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) was ignored by those who studied religion and did not attract the attention of the media. However, at the end of the 1980s, the huge curing events organized by the UCKG in public space along with its political projects received considerable press coverage, and since then relations between the Universal Church and different groups in Brazilian society have been tense. The controversy surrounding the church during this period is due to three factors that are usually associated with it by analyses concerned with distinguishing it from other Pentecostal denominations: political participation, the devil and money. During the 1990s, the UCKG was severely criticized for the way it articulated “cure, exorcism and prosperity”. Since then, many of the religious and scientific analysts have entertained certain misgivings in relation to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Bittencourt 1994; Campos 1997; Carneiro Campos 1994; Hortal 1991; Mariano 1996; Siepierski 1997a). Characteristics such as: immediatism, pragmatism, magic, charlatanism and theological superficiality are attributed especially to the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. And, above all, it is accused of being an agency for the financial exploitation of the poor.

But although the church has been extensively analyzed during the 1990s in a series of studies that enriched the discussion of the changes that had occurred in Brazil’s religious scene, little space has been devoted to understanding the members of the UCKG, the defender of the Theology of Prosperity. Despite this membership’s¹ significant growth, most interpretations of the phenomenon do little more than characterize it sociologically and demographically: it is composed of people from the poorer strata of Brazilian society who are concentrated in urban areas and, often, do not have access to the formal labor market or to education and health services.

It is true that members of Pentecostal churches usually affirm that they seek religion to alleviate their afflictions. It is also true that, in recent times, Brazilian society has been exposed to a series of threats and needs of all kinds, and that the view that the country can be

transformed by using rational instruments of political intervention has lost ground. But why has a large part of this country's poor sought solutions to their problems specifically in the Theology of Prosperity? How do these social subjects represent their experience of faith?

This article is motivated by the need to discuss the view – previously examined by Mariz (1995) – that the Pentecostal world lacks doctrinal seriousness and is constituted, on the one hand, by a clerical body of “charlatans”, “deceivers of the poor” and “merchants of the faith” and on the other, by a group of “illiterate”, “fanatical”, “alienated” and “suggestionable” members (Mariano 1996). Based on information regarding the cosmology of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and ethnographic material relating to the confessional commitment of the faithful and their perceptions regarding ‘life change’, obtained during periods spent with members of the UCKG, who came from the popular strata of society, I intend to elucidate the logic of a religious belonging that, contrary to the so-called fluidity and transitory nature of the supposedly utilitarian tie with this church, have, in many cases already surpassed ten years.

Although market symbolism is the issue here, it is not addressed from the same perspective as the one adopted, for example, by Campos (1997). This author, who is interested in the “mercantilization of the sacred”, analyzes the UCKG as a “business” that is symptomatic of the process he understands as neo-Pentecostalism’s integration into the market logic prevailing in “neo-liberal” Brazil, and analyzes the rhetorical tools, which in his opinion, constitute the set of marketing strategies used, apparently intentionally by the Church’s management, to conquer its “customers”. By examining the theology of the Universal Church, the place occupied in its cosmovision by market values, the way these tenets are communicated to the faithful during services and how the latter experience the beliefs induced in the UCKG rituals outside the concrete context of religious observance, my purpose is to deepen our understanding of the meanings – imported from the mercantile sphere – that have permeated Brazilian social practices since the 1990’s.

The “Meeting of Businessmen”

During the second semester of 2005, before making contact with members of the Church, I attended the services at the “World Cathedral” for some time, in order to become more familiar with this universe. Because of my research interests I focused on the Monday services that take place not only at the Cathedral, but in all UCKG temples. At these meetings it was not difficult to note the much publicized undisguised references to money and the right to property and plenty that corresponded to the proposal described at the UCKG website.

Indeed, during the two hours these services last, the bishop's sermon is explicitly dedicated to the theme of money. On these occasions, it is not just the money donated to the Church by the faithful that is referred to, but also the money that one can obtain through faith, as in the case of the faithful who go up to the altar and give their "testimony". To discuss this matter Church members use terms and contents drawn from the semantic field of economics, such as "firm", "business", "profit", "contract", "increase in production", "machinery" "product differentiation in the market", "unemployment", besides references to the large quantities "you will earn", "that you will be able to pay as a tithe when God blesses you". At these meetings, apart from paying the tithe, which is compulsory, believers are emphatically encouraged to come up to the altar and also contribute to "God's Work" by donating "offerings". For – as is explained to them –, by helping the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God to publicize the "living and powerful message of the Lord Jesus Christ's Gospel", the faithful are entering into a "commitment with God" and thus have the right to feel that they are "partners of God".

By becoming an ally of God in the struggle against the devil and, "inhabited by the Holy Spirit", developing an unlimited confidence in God, the member becomes a privileged person and will receive from the Lord "the full and happy life" he is entitled to. The money collected is important in this theology because it enables the Church to maintain itself and to grow in order to fulfill its spiritual role of spreading the gospel's good tidings to millions of souls and free them from the causes of their misfortunes.

Eliminating "evil" and its threats, its members and potentially the entire humanity will have access to an earthly "life of plenty". God does not desire poverty for his followers. A "blessed life", in harmony with God, is a "life of abundance".

Ethnography of Belonging

I met Wilsonⁱⁱ in October 2005. His readiness to collaborate with my research has made it possible for me to meet other members of the UCKG, and enabled me to hear their explanations as to how "walking in faith" "changed" their lives. Wilson's confessional history began in his childhood, when, very small, he used to be taken by his family to the Methodist Church. However, at that time he "did not feel the faith". This is why, he explains, when he was eleven and "outside the church, he "fell into bad company" and ended up being arrested for theft.

Wilson emphasizes that joining the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God was a matter of choice. He repeats that "it were experiences in [his] life" that led him there. As he

came “from the world, went out a lot, dated a lot, kept all kinds of company. You can’t. You must be clean and a guy has to choose. The Holy Spirit, really, is a desire.”

In time, after assessing the view of the world professed there, and having taken the decision to become a member, Wilson began “to enter into contact with God” and to “dedicate himself spiritually in the Church” until he was “raised to the position of ‘obreiro’” eight years ago. He “gave up bad company” in order to be in the Church and struggle to improve himself. He used to get irritated when his former friends accused him of having been brain-washed by Bispo Macedo. “Those who speak of alienation don’t know what they’re talking about. Just take a good look and you’ll see that the whole thing there is based on the bible. I made my choice.”

According to him, his private life was developing in tandem with his spiritual life. The literature on Pentecostalism usually attributes the improvement the converted observe in their lives to the “separation from the world” (Novaes 1985). Furthermore, it is clear that joining a community of faith means becoming part of a social network formed by people whose support can be counted on in difficult moments, and in which information and opportunities circulate. Lastly, in Weber’s classic words, “[the] admission to the congregation is regarded as an absolute guarantee of moral qualities, especially the qualities required in commercial matters” (1979: 350). However, this does not fully explain Wilson’s trajectory.

The Theology of Prosperity in Brazil

The “Theology of Prosperity” began penetrating many churches and various Brazilian paraecclesiastical ministries at the end of the 1970s and, subverting the antimony between the sacred and the enjoyment of fortune on earth, preaches that if they trust God unconditionally, believers are destined to be “prosperous”, “healthy”, “happy” and “victorious” in all their worldly undertakings. According to this doctrine, the faithful, through the positive confession, will have access to all the good things of life, and the relation between a Christian and God is a reciprocal one: to receive the Lord’s Grace he should “live according to the faith”, give the tithe regularly and make his offerings. The message of Prosperity frees the faithful from the ascetic requirements determined by historical Protestantism and by traditional Pentecostal denominations, and not only legitimates but also encourages a life of plenitude here and now.

What are the meanings that structure the system of representations that, specifically since the 1990s, has led to the growing acceptance of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God’s formula?

During the 1990s, Brazil witnessed the implementation of the “free market”. From the early 1990s onwards, parameters clearly derived from the mercantile imaginary, such as the minimal state, entrepreneurialism, initiative, efficiency, productivity and business capacity have increasingly come to occupy a privileged position in the media, in the political and intellectual debate, in the decision-making processes of industrial and financial groups, in some of the major political parties, in some academic circles and also in the technocracy.

The values stimulated by the moral system of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God – “victory”, “life change”, “prosperity” – and repeated in its pedagogy oriented towards enterprising work – “fight”, “businessman”, “differentiate your product” – are in opposition, not only to unemployment, but also to the idea of a job, unanimously seen there as a “dead end”, for it condemns people to “a petty existence of poverty and humiliation”. These values are not therefore different from those dear to the professional ethic postulated by the post-social market installed in the 1990s. According to demographic data, most of the Church’s faithful are at the bottom of Brazil’s social pyramid. These social subjects do not usually have access to business schools nor are they employees of large corporations, or if they are, they do not occupy positions that benefit from profit-sharing schemes, and do not have investments or equivalent assets. But they are reached through the mass media and are thus part of the social circuit of diffusion and discussion of the most wide-ranging elements of individualistic ideology, as well as the specific hedonistic meanings that constitute this economic ethos that equates “work” with “success” in a linear fashion, insistently underscored by the contemporary hegemonic word.

Some authors defend the viewpoint that poor urban Brazilians, highly vulnerable to unemployment and underemployment, are attracted to the UCKG because of the promise of prosperity that it promotes through a vigorous proselitistic strategy. However this hypothesis is not sufficient to explain why this Pentecostal denomination, that has professed the Theology of Prosperity since its foundation in 1977, became so attractive in the 1990s that it was able to increase its membership by 25% a year exactly during this period. Drawing on Fry and Howe’s (1975) article, I believe that such a significant growth occurred at this time because it was during this period that the symbols it articulates to formulate the cosmological message it preaches – and even the message itself – found resonance in the symbolic system that had come to impart meaning to Brazil’s social experience as a whole. In the social context I examine, poverty has always been a source of difficulties. Despite this, the figures regarding the Church’s penetration before the 1990s, reveal that the concept of reward in this world (central to the theology of prosperity) had not attained the religious legitimacy, and

thus the appeal amongst the poor, that it conquered when the exhibition of the glory of the “winners” began to occupy such a lot of space, and in such an insistent fashion, in the secular mass media.

Notes

ⁱ According to the IBGE Census, the number of UCKG faithful/followers rose from 269 thousand in 1991 to 2.1 million in the year 2000.

ⁱⁱ The informants' names were changed to protect their identities.

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