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Power, Powerlessness and the Holy Spirit

In countries such as Guatemala and Nicaragua, a large proportion of the population belongs to the Pentecostal movement. Encounters with this faith community provide researchers with insights into a complex of religious practice, social inequality, and violence.

Brothers, we stand before the reality of the agents of Satan with their extraordinary and supernatural powers. (...) And we are the agents of God, the Almighty! So I believe, brothers, we are at the beginning of a worldwide conflict between the satanic powers and their agents and the

genuine power of the agents of God."

This warlike rhetoric, which might almost seem to be taken from a Hezbollah radio broadcast, was delivered by an upper middle-class Pentecostal preacher during the Guatemalan civil war. His words represent the growing

presence of religious movements and organisations in political life. They presuppose an environment in which interpreting and coping with life on the basis of religious belief appears to be the only reasonable choice.

A poor indigenous Indian farmer has a different story to tell:

"The soldiers dragged my brother-in-law out of his house during the night. When he was found the next morning, he had been tortured and his throat had been cut. (...) Now the Bible itself says that when the end of the world is approaching, all these things will happen."

Both statements date from the time of the civil wars in Guatemala and Nicaragua and were recorded as part of a research project carried out by the author in the mid-1980s. They point to characteristic differences associated with the social status of the speakers.

The first, a professional preacher, belongs to the upper middle class, for whom war and economic crisis brought about a crisis of their upward mobility. He swears himself and his fellow believers to a strategy of power and influence: We can bind all the powers of darkness ...! The second opts for a retreat into his congregation. This is the only security one has: to prepare oneself in order to be ready to meet the Lord. Both men belong to the Pentecostal movement that has spread rapidly in Latin America since the 1960s. Its members believe in the ecstatic experience of the Holy Spirit, await the coming of the Kingdom of God, and frequently emphasise the autonomy of local churches.

However, sociological observation reveals that both men, who supposedly share the same Pentecostal theology, derive quite different religious beliefs and social and political strategies from it.

Thirty years after my first research project in Guatemala and Nicaragua, the marked polarisation of war-torn societies

has given way to greater social and political diversity. Opportunities to participate in political life have significantly increased. The Pentecostal churches have also become more diverse. The wealth of Pentecostal symbolism, and the freedom with which its different aspects may be combined produce very different variations of religious practice in different social classes, age groups, and marginal social groups.

In both countries, for instance, violence has changed its face. It is no longer military, but crime is all-pervasive in civil society. A belief in the protection of the Holy Spirit creates a feeling of security. In many impoverished areas of the large cities, for example, one of only two laws prevails: the armed law of the drug dealers on the streets or the law of the "Lord of

Hosts" in the churches. For young people, in particular, the Pentecostal churches often provide the only opportunity to escape the gangs, to banish the "demons of violence", and to seek an alternative means of social integration.

The fight for social participation has also changed. The price of having a share in the aspirations of the emerging middle classes is extreme pressure – the threat of sliding down the ladder again in the event of the smallest slip in discipline. Services at middle-class Pentecostal churches supply an antidote to stress and burnout and special career coaching – all through the power of the Holy Spirit and of the Risen Christ. Religious shows at so-called megachurches respond to these expectations by driving out the "demons of failure" or "despondency" and

Left: A mass baptism in São Paulo. Below: Rural poverty in Guatemala.





Left: Heartfelt prayer, seen here before a baptism, is an integral part of charismatic religion. Below right: Intercessory group prayer with the blessing of a boy at a service in Guatemala.

cesses with their social environment, many classic questions in religious sociology return to the fore: the function of religion as a way of coping with uncertainty; the relationship between Max Weber's status groups, social classes, and religion; the delineation of a specific religious sphere as opposed to a political or economic sphere; and the transformation of religious identities into cultural and political strategies. The decisive factor in religious practice is, of course, to use Max Weber's words, the "subjective meaning" that actors ascribe to their actions: their religious beliefs.

Our approach, which is based on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of practice, allows us to view these perspectives all together. It enables us to reconstruct the beliefs of religious actors within the context of their experiences and within a framework of social competition and functional differentiation – as religious practice. This approach combines the examination of subjective religious meaning with questions relating to the sociology of authority and differentiation. On this basis we developed the method of "habitus analysis".

This method allows us to make use of qualitative material such as interviews, sermons, texts, and web presentations, as well as visual documents and ritual practices. It is based on the simplest of assumptions: that all human beings

are expounding to audiences the goals of a quasi-entrepreneurial self-management.

In the wake of democratisation, this form of religious practice is also acquiring greater social influence through better opportunities for political participation. Individuals and organised groups can be politically active not only by exercising the right to vote and joining political parties, but also through civil engagement at local level. Within this context, the leadership elite in Pentecostal churches are becoming increasingly aware of their social importance. By providing social care, private schools, and even urbanisation projects, they are competing with the state and evolving into powerful non-governmental organisations. Some religious leaders are even setting up their own political parties and putting forward presidential candidates – a fact which is viewed

with scepticism by members of many small Pentecostal churches in marginalised areas.

The Catholic Church is particularly sceptical, because Pentecostalism has grown to become a serious competitor. Having begun in the USA in the early 20th century, the movement quickly spread to Latin America, where it has grown with great rapidity since the 1970s. Today almost 45 percent of the population of Guatemala belongs to the Pentecostal or the Evangelical faith, while the figure in Nicaragua is about 40 percent. In Guatemala the movement competes with a Catholic church that tended to be rather critical of the state, while in Nicaragua it is in the shadow of a Catholic hierarchy that is traditionally closely allied with power.

To understand the complex interactions of these religious pro-



accumulate positive and negative experiences and interpret these in a manner relevant to them, whether religious or non-religious. Experiences and interpretations relevant to the actors in question can thus be methodically compiled in a system. In this way the analysis reveals a network – a cognitive map of religious actors which can be interpreted within the context of their environments.

This method of analysis sheds light on the examples given at the beginning. It becomes possible to explain why the "agent of God" with the power of the "Holy Spirit" not only drives out the demons of war-related stress (be it alcoholism, bulimia or paranoia), but also the demons of the trade

unions and the guerrillas – and why he supports the elimination of the indigenous Indian population by the military regime. It also becomes clear why the farmer retreats into his congregation and hopes for the end of the world. Finally, it becomes obvious why the Pentecostal farmer has nothing in common with the above quoted Pentecostal preacher, nor wishes to have, but in fact fears him.

This approach has been continuously developed over the course of 30 years of research on religion by the head of the current research team. During a nine-year academic appointment in Latin America, it was amply validated through other empirical studies partly involving members of the Pentecostal church. Since 2006, it has been tested and refined at Bielefeld University in projects on religious peacemakers in Bosnia and Herzegovina (a DFG-funded project), religious styles in Argentina, religious diversity in Mexico, as well as a comparative study on Islamic and US fundamentalism. A research project based on this approach is currently being carried out in Guatemala and Nicaragua – the field research areas of the project head in the 1980s.

It is intended that the synchronic comparison of the two countries will later be complemented by a comparison between the situation in the 1980s and the situation today. This 30-year period has seen the end of the guerrilla wars and the arrival of peace processes involving religious actors. Social inequality has become more marked and violence has gone from being a military phenomenon to being a phenomenon of civil society. In

view of the changed social environment, it is likely that we will uncover significant change in religious beliefs and practice.

A wealth of evidence points to increased political activity on the part of various religious groups – in contrast to what is referred to (primarily) in Europe as "secularisation". The extent to which these activities contribute to peace or conflict, and the effect of the growing influence of religion on society and politics, are questions that remain to be examined.



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