

Article

Neoliberalism and Religion in Latin America

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Abstract: The term “neoliberalism” has variable and broad meanings. It has even been suggested that we should dispense with the term altogether. However, in this text, I defend that we can find a very powerful concept of neoliberalism in the works of Dardot-Laval, and Brown. These thinkers show us that neoliberalism needs to be conceived as a rationality that produces a specific kind of human subjectivity, namely, the neoliberal *Homo Oeconomicus* or the *Homo Neoliberalis*. Such a concept is, in addition, crucial to understand the most recent and visible changes in Latin American religiosity, that is, the so-called “Latin American Protestant Turn”. This turn, as has been noted, should be more precisely called the “Latin American Pentecostal Turn”. Based on empirical studies that describe the main elements of this turn, I describe what seems to be the principal traits of the religiosity of the Latin American *Homo Neoliberalis*.

Keywords: neoliberalism; homo oeconomicus; homo neoliberalis; Latin America; pentecostalism; new age



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1. Introduction

The term “neoliberalism” has variable and broad meanings. In Raschke’s words, “Neoliberalism is a stranger animal than any conventional template for theory can furnish an account of” (Raschke 2019, p. 10). For this reason, in certain academic and political contexts it has become commonplace to assert that it is best to dispense with the term altogether.

In a literature review, Boas and Gans-Morse (2009) found that the vast majority of scientific publications referring to neoliberalism did not present a definition of it, despite claiming to describe a wide range of empirical issues related to neoliberalism’s effects. They also found that the term is used asymmetrically across the spectrum of political positions. That is, it is a term used almost exclusively by its critics and avoided by those who favor some of the economic characteristics of neoliberalism such as free markets, competition, privatization, and deregulation. The latter often describe themselves as advocates of orthodox or neoclassical economic policies. Boas and Gans-Morse suggest that for the expression to have analytical and not simply rhetorical value, it must be ascribed a substantive meaning of its own (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009, p. 139).

In this text, I will defend that this substantive meaning is found, especially, in the theoretical proposals of Wendy Brown, Pierre Dardot, and Christian Laval, as well as in those of Santiago Castro-Gómez and Carl Raschke. All of them, beyond their nuances and differences, have a profound commonality: they use Foucault’s reflections at the *Collège de France* (1970–1984) to understand neoliberalism as a rationality that produces a specific kind of human subjectivity. They often describe it with expressions such as normative rationality, normative order of reason, political theology, or a new way of the world.

Among all these, Brown’s book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* is recognized for being the point of reference (Raschke 2019, p. 2).¹ Brown presents an understanding of neoliberalism that emphasizes the dominant subjectivity in this new normative order of reason, namely, the new subjectivity of the neoliberal *Homo Oeconomicus*.

I consider that this conception of neoliberalism is valuable for understanding the most recent and visible changes in Latin American religiosity, which, as is widely documented, refer to the growth of Pentecostal Protestantism; the reflections of Brown, Laval, and Dardot on the *Homo Oeconomicus* shed relevant light on the evolution of Latin American religiosity. Additionally, I consider that directing our gaze to such evolution in the light of the understanding of neoliberalism proposed by Brown and others, allows us, in turn, to broaden this conception of neoliberalism to include an aspect neglected by most of them: the religiosity of the neoliberal subjectivity.

In what follows, I first describe the understanding of neoliberalism that I find fundamental in the perspectives of the authors mentioned above. Subsequently, I present a description of the so-called “Protestant turn” in Latin America. Based on the above, in the third part of the text, I show the connections between the changes in Latin American religiosity and the development of neoliberalism. In other words, I attempt to describe the Latin American neoliberal *Homo Oeconomicus* as connected to the most recent developments in Latin American religiosity.² My text concludes with some final remarks.

2. Neoliberalism as the Rationality of the *Homo Oeconomicus*

Brown and Dardot-Laval understand neoliberalism to be the dominant normative rationality deployed in the last 50 years around the planet. Their vision of neoliberalism is based on historical-empirical elements that have occurred during this period, but also goes beyond these, since their interest lies in unveiling what we could call, extending Kantian terminology, the “transcendental” elements of neoliberalism.

Based on the historical-empirical elements, neoliberalism is framed as the particular political and economic reaction against Keynesianism and democratic socialism. In this sense, neoliberalism is the set of economic policies produced in a particular phase of capitalism, where the emphasis is placed especially on competition and the liberation of financial markets. At this level, neoliberalism has different theoretical origins (ordoliberalism, the Walter Lippmann Colloquium, the intellectuals of the Chicago School, etc.) and different empirical manifestations (as a violent experiment in the Global South, especially with the Pinochet’s dictatorship, or as the new phase of Western civilization, especially with the economic policies of Reagan and Thatcher). For this reason, theoretical agreements are difficult to reach, even among the authors interested in maintaining the use of the term “neoliberalism”.³ This level, in any case, corresponds to the general and common understanding of the term, which is usually understood as a set of economic policies that seek to defend the freedom of markets in the context of financial capitalism. These policies include the deregulation of industries and capital flows, the radical reduction of welfare state measures aimed at protecting the most vulnerable, the privatization of public goods (education, parks, postal services, roads, prisons, security), the reduction of progressive taxes, and the end of social and economic policies for the redistribution of wealth.

However, what is interesting about proposals such as those of Brown and Dardot-Laval is that they go beyond the history and implementation of such economic policies and propose an understanding of neoliberalism from what I call its “transcendental dimension”, which refers to the rationality that creates and justifies both the conditions of possibility of such policies and the conditions of possibility of a new human experience. This is why such policies can, in principle, be contradictory to each other, as they are dependent on the socio-political context in which they are adopted. As Brown acknowledges, neoliberalism “intersects in Sweden with the continued legitimacy of welfarism, in South Africa with a post-Apartheid expectation of a democratizing and redistributive state, in China with Confucianism, post-Maoism, and capitalism, in the United States with a strange brew of long-established antistatism and new managerialism” (Brown 2015, p. 20). Neoliberal coherence is found, instead, in the relationship that exists between such policies and the underlying rationality that gives them meaning while constituting the creative force of a new kind of human experience.

Hence, from its transcendental dimension, neoliberalism should be framed as a normative order of reason that attempts to “economize” the structural elements of human life (people’s lives, scientific and technological knowledge, the juridical-political organization of society, the personality structure of individuals, etc.). To achieve this, its economic policies have in common the aim of converting the most fundamentals human needs and desires into an enterprise based on profit, competition, and gain.

The transcendental dimension of neoliberalism also constitutes its most creative side. In the words of Dardot and Laval,

Neo-liberalism is not merely destructive of rules, institutions and rights. It is also productive of certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities. In other words, at stake in neo-liberalism is nothing more, nor less, than the form of our existence—the way in which we are led to conduct ourselves, to relate to others and to ourselves. Neo-liberalism defines a certain existential norm in western societies and, far beyond them, in all those societies that follow them on the path of ‘modernity’. This norm enjoins everyone to live in a world of generalized competition; it calls upon wage-earning classes and populations to engage in economic struggle against one another; it aligns social relations with the model of the market; it promotes the justification of ever greater inequalities; it even transforms the individual, now called on to conceive and conduct him- or herself as an Enterprise. (Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 8)

As Foucault noted in his lesson of March 21, from the perspective of the neoliberal rationality, even the mother–child relationship, i.e., the quality of care, the affection lavished, and the monitoring of the child’s development and education, represent a measurable investment in time that leads to the constitution of a human capital that will eventually produce an income (Foucault 2008, p. 243). From its transcendental dimension, thus, neoliberalism structures and organizes a way of being and living whose impact can be seen, especially, in the configuration of subjectivities and contemporary human experiences, which begin to develop, eminently, as a neoliberal *Homo Oeconomicus*.

The nature of this neoliberal *Homo Oeconomicus* has been widely discussed. Foucault understood it explicitly as “the man of enterprise and production” (147) albeit self-oriented (*Homo Oeconomicus* as an entrepreneur of himself); Dardot and Laval, in line with Foucault, understand it, too, as an entrepreneur.⁴ I believe that Brown’s reflections allow us to develop a fairly complete analysis of the nature of this *Homo Oeconomicus* and, therefore, of a good part of the transcendental dimension of neoliberalism. From her reflections, we can identify three aspects that allow us to describe more precisely this new neoliberal subjectivity.

(i) *Homo Neoliberalis* is a subjectivity constructed under the model of financial capital or investment capital. It is then a financialized human capital. “Its project is to self-invest in ways that enhance its value or to attract investors through constant attention to its actual or figurative credit rating, and to do this across every sphere of its existence” (Brown 2015, p. 33). In this logic, the human being is a subject governed by the purpose of permanently improving and leveraging its competitive position. It is a subject that always seeks to increase its portfolio value, monetary or otherwise, through all kinds of efforts. This is one explanation of the boom in self-help literature as coherent with the demand for entrepreneurship as the new driving force in the formation of new successful human beings. *Homo Neoliberalis*, thus, reduces the human being to a portfolio of values and services in which investors are constantly invested and attracted. Whether through the number of followers in social networks, the “likes” obtained for publications, the implementation of rankings and classifications of all kinds, or through structured practices of monetary forms, education, leisure time, reproduction, consumption, and, in general, all the fundamental areas of human experience are configured based on strategic decisions and practices aimed at enhancing self-value in the competition between human capital.

(ii) *Homo Neoliberalis* is a subjectivity oriented, above all, to strengthen its position and increasingly appreciate its value amid constant social competition. Therefore, more than

an agent that exchanges its interests, products, and services in the market, the neoliberal subject is an agent that permanently competes with other neoliberal subjects. Therefore, the guiding principle of the neoliberal market is not exchange but competition. This subtle difference is fundamental because, as Foucault noted, it represents a modification of the liberal principle of exchange which, at least apparently, did presuppose equality. In a market organized on the basis of exchange, the idea of equality, even if it is considered unrealizable in the real world, functioned as a principle regulating exchanges. However, when competition is the fundamental guiding principle, inequality is the corollary assumed and accepted as the means and the relationship that unites and defines the realm of human capital.⁵ As Brown points out, “equality ceases to be an a priori or fundament of neoliberalized democracy. In legislation, jurisprudence, and the popular imaginary, inequality becomes normal, even normative. A democracy composed of human capital features winners and losers, not equal treatment or equal protection” (Brown 2015, p. 38).

(iii) *Homo Neoliberalis* also represents the attempt to suppress any other modern subjectivity that might compete with it, such as that of *Homo Juridicus* and *Homo Politicus*,⁶ or, at most, the establishment of a hierarchy in favor of the former by which all the plural forms of subjectivity promised by liberal democracy and modernity are homogenized in the model of the *Homo Neoliberalis* as human capital (Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 331). Hence, out of the rationality of neoliberalism, it is almost impossible to develop discussions of common and public goods. Neoliberal subjectivity is contrary to the configuration of a modern subject as an autonomous subject with its own interests, protected by law, which can be validated and generalized in the political arena. The normative ideal of the citizen is reduced to an economic agent in permanent competition with others.⁷ Political discussions at the state level, for example, are predefined based on the priority goals of economic growth, global competition, and, especially in the case of the countries of the South, the maintenance of credit ratings given by international agencies. In this context, as Brown points out, *Homo Politicus* is seriously threatened, since “we are no longer creatures of moral autonomy, freedom, or equality. We no longer choose our ends or the means to them. We are no longer even creatures of interest relentlessly seeking to satisfy ourselves” (Brown 2015, p. 42). The freedom of neoliberal subjects is then reduced to the generalization of the possibility of pursuing their own self-enhancement as human capital emancipated from any kind of social, political, or collective regulations. With this freedom, *Homo Neoliberalis* is “inserted into the norms and imperatives of market conduct and integrated into the purposes of the firm, industry, region, nation, or postnational constellation to which their survival is tethered” (Brown 2015, p. 108).

Now, neither Brown nor Dardot-Laval seem interested in the destinies of another type of subject, namely, *Homo Religiosus*. They do not appear interested in wondering what could have happened to it upon the arrival of the neoliberal *Homo Oeconomicus*. Did it die out completely, as suggested by this narrative, which, moreover, seems to accept the dominant, Eurocentric narrative of secularization and modernity? Or, if it still exists, as suggested by critics of the Eurocentric view of secularization, how have its religious beliefs and practices been transformed?

In what follows, I approach these questions in the Latin American context. I describe the most notable change that occurred in the Latin American religious landscape, namely, the so-called “Latin American Protestant turn”, whereby a continent that until a few decades ago was unquestionably Catholic is beginning to see an important diversity within its Christian religiosity. Subsequently, I show how this change can be connected to the rise of neoliberalism understood in its transcendental dimension as I have described it in this section.

3. The Protestant–Pentecostal Turn in Latin America

Neoliberalism, from the point of view of its economic policies, began to develop in Latin America in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a replacement for import-substituting industrialization (ISI), the emblematic economic policy that prevailed in Latin America

between 1930 and 1980 and sought to promote in the economies of the region the production of goods traditionally imported from “developed” economies. In the context of the 1980s crisis, Latin American elites “convinced themselves that the ‘national development strategies’ centered on ISI should be abandoned, and that economic dynamism could be restored—while preserving the existing patterns of social and economic exclusion—only by embracing neoliberalism and ‘globalization’” (Saad Filho 2005, p. 224)⁸.

In parallel, since the 1980s, the Latin American religious landscape began to show remarkable changes: the most confessionally Catholic subcontinent in the world began to see a steady growth of Protestant denominations, to the point that nowadays almost 20% of Latin Americans identify themselves as Protestant.⁹ In Latin America, the “secularizing winds” of the last decades have implied less the increase of agnostic or atheist positions than the increase of religious plurality within the Christian tradition itself (Bastián 1997).

However, if we look at the details of the data on the “Protestant turn”, we will see that the great majority of these “new Protestant believers” refer to the Pentecostal groups, which represent, according to an influential study by Bonino 1995, the third face of Protestantism in Latin America, distinguishable from the liberal and evangelical faces.

The liberal or historical face of Protestantism, connected with the “historical” Protestant communities (especially Methodism, Calvinism, and Lutheranism), was oriented, in the beginning, towards the “non-Latin American” inhabitants residing in our subcontinent. Subsequently, and very slowly, it started to open to the nationals of the countries where the Protestant Churches were established. This type of Protestantism was from its beginnings very interested in educational and social tasks, and has been an advocate of religious freedom, separation of Church and State, civil marriage, and secular education; hence the label “liberal Protestantism”. Evangelical Protestantism was a revival and renewal movement with a strong missionary dimension. The most distinguishing features of this movement were, on the one hand, its claim to interpret the Bible literally and, on the other, assuming an eschatology that denied value to temporal realities and privileged distancing from the world as the best preparation for the “coming of the Lord”. (Guadalupe and Grundberger 2018, p. 17). In the everyday language, these religious groups were identified as “*los evangélicos*” or “*los cristianos*”, and their evangelizing orientation has always been their main characteristic.¹⁰

The Pentecostal face, which refers to the main protagonist of this extraordinary Latin American Protestant turn, differs from the previous ones, among other aspects, in the active and wide occupation of the Latin American public sphere by these communities. Pentecostalism is a religious movement that is deeply connected with the Pentecost, that is, with the Christian feast that commemorates the encounter of the Holy Ghost with the apostles after the resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹¹ In Christian doctrine, the Pentecost is interpreted as the baptism in the Holy Ghost that reaffirms the commitment to Jesus Christ after his resurrection; a commitment that is evidenced in the gifts of the Holy Ghost that come to the believers, as indicated in Acts 2:1–4 where we read that the apostles “were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance”. Although the biblical text explicitly refers to glossolalia (speaking in tongues), this is only one of the possible gifts of the Holy Ghost, which become visible in the uninhibited and enthusiastic religious expressions of the parishioners as these gifts evidence God’s blessings.

This theological connection with the manifestation of the work of the Holy Spirit in the everyday lives of believers could explain, to a large extent, the practical-political turn that these movements have taken in comparison, above all, with the previous evangelical face. Indeed, unlike evangelical Protestantism, Pentecostalism considers that to be consistent with the coming of the Kingdom of God, the believers must strive to transform themselves and, thus, society, which has included in many cases actively occupying spaces of political power (Baptista and Ospina 2017).

It is not surprising then that, unlike many Evangelical believers, Pentecostals are believers who turned to the world to change it, from an attitude, not of renunciation, but

of joy and being filled with the gifts of the Holy Ghost. “We can affirm that, if for the evangelical generation of the 60s and 70s the dominant perspective was that of suffering, Protestant asceticism and the theology of the cross, the evangelical generation of the 90s has grown from the affirmation of enjoyment, the elimination of pain and the theology of resurrection” (Amat and León 2004, p. 121).

In Latin American sociology of religion, there are very deep disagreements in relation to the causes of this theological-political turn of the third face of Latin American Protestantism. Which internal and external factors influenced, as Freston states, the passage from “the believer does not get involved in politics” to “brother votes for brother” (Freston 1993)? How does one explain the transition from an Evangelical theological vision of rejection of society and the world to an affirmative Pentecostal theological perspective of politics and economics?

In an attempt to respond to the above, Latin American social researchers have proposed various hypotheses,¹² some referring to the theological maturation of Latin American Protestantism, others related to the collapse of communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall, which implied the elimination of the “atheist enemy” (Guadalupe and Grundberger 2018, p. 34ff), and some have even proposed possible connections between the rise of Pentecostalism and the strategies of imperialist expansion in Latin America on the part of the United States.¹³ Other authors have proposed to explain this turn as a natural development of the existing connections between Pentecostalism and Latin American popular religiosity, specifically in relation to beliefs in miracles, demons, and spiritual interventions (Beltrán 2010).¹⁴

In more recent social studies, the explanation for the Latin American Protestant–Pentecostal turn is often based on apparently contradictory economic reasons. For some researchers, the poverty generated by neoliberal economic reforms has created social conditions conducive to the growth of Pentecostal communities (Calzadilla 2008). For others, in contrast, the success of Pentecostalism is due to its ability to functionally adapt to the new market logics insofar as it has been able, more than any other religion, to respond to the expectations of the growing Latin American middle class identified with the “American lifestyle” (Beltrán 2010, p. 76). Thus, pauperization and inequality as well as Latin American prosperity, diversification, and economic openness have been used as explanatory means of the Protestant–Pentecostal turn.

In the following section, I follow the path indicated by these socio-economic considerations but with the aim of bringing into conversation the social characteristics of Pentecostalism and the neo-liberal subjectivity of *Homo Oeconomicus*. Using empirical studies of the causes of the growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America and the modifications of Latin American religiosity,¹⁵ I reflect on what this growth tells us about the religiosity of the Latin American *Homo Neoliberalis*.

4. The Religiosity of the Latin American *Homo Neoliberalis*

I will now present a description of the religiosity of the *Homo Neoliberalis* based on four aspects of the Latin American Protestant–Pentecostal turn. These elements are (i) its theological basis, (ii) the structure of its churches, (iii) the emotional way it expresses and disseminates its religious message, and (iv) its impact on the different social classes of Latin American societies.

These four elements are described in the vast majority of studies on Pentecostalism in Latin America and account for the most discussed issues about its growth. However, these elements are also valuable in showing that the religiosity of the *Homo Neoliberalis* goes far beyond Pentecostal believers. While empirical analyses of Pentecostalism are valuable for understanding the religiosity of the *Homo Neoliberalis*, the latter should not be understood as equivalent to the Pentecostal believer since neoliberal religiosity, as I will show, goes beyond the empirical realities of Pentecostal communities. This is why, in this section, I will also make use of social studies that have attempted to describe two other very important

changes in the Latin American religious field, namely, the development of the charismatic renewal movement within Catholicism and the so-called *New Age* movements.

(i) Prosperity Gospel as the Theology of the New and Successful Contemporary Religious Manifestations

The most commonly obvious element that would connect neoliberalism with Pentecostalism is the theological basis that a good number of authors, particularly critics of both phenomena, tend to attribute to the latter, namely the so-called Prosperity Theology or Prosperity Gospel.¹⁶ This theological framework can be considered a kind of Kingdom Theology insofar as it affirms the presence of the Kingdom of God on earth. This presence should be evidenced in the social and economic well-being of all members of the Church.

In the specific case of some Pentecostal Churches, the explicit turn towards this type of theological framework is easy to notice, as pointed out by one of the pastors belonging to the Centro de Fe y Esperanza Church in Colombia, who points out how in Latin America “(...) they began to talk about the Kingdom of Heaven more than about the Gospel of Salvation. Because the Gospel of Salvation usually meant “come, and be baptized, start singing in church, let the church grow!” (...) The Kingdom of Heaven began to discover that God is so perfect that He can embed himself, or can penetrate into politics, sports, social issues, or economics. For example, I am currently working in political marketing with some pastors and some Christians”.¹⁷

Prosperity Theology proposes a direct involvement with the realities of this world, as did Latin American Liberation Theology and, in general, the social gospel of the Catholic Church. However, the involvement of Prosperity Theology does not start from a radical critique of the existing social order and its basic structures, nor does it propose a profound transformation of it beyond that which may occur by virtue of the individual and family processes of vital transformation of believers.¹⁸ Hence, social studies have concluded that the “emphasis that the new Pentecostal versions grant to economic prosperity makes them functional to the global logic of the market and consumption. Therefore, urban Pentecostalism does not constitute a subversive or contesting proposal to the dominant economic system, nor to the consumer society; rather, they contribute to its reproduction” (Beltrán 2013, p. 146).

The strong presence of the Prosperity Gospel in many Latin American Pentecostal Churches reveals the connection between the latter and some U.S. Evangelical currents, given that the historical origins of Prosperity Gospel are located in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from an entwining between Pentecostalism, the so-called *New Thought* and an interpretation of the Gospel strongly close to the U.S. cultural values of individualism and social mobility (Bowler 2018). This interweaving generated a theological framework centered especially on four themes: faith, wealth, health, and victory. In this framework, faith is understood as a special power capable of releasing spiritual forces in such a way that the spoken word can be incorporated into reality to affect it. This is why both wealth and health can be understood as manifestations of the believer’s faith, and the palpable transformations of material reality are, in this sense, proof of God’s victory through the faith of the believer. “The movement expects faith to be marked by victory. Believers trust that culture holds no political, social, or economic impediment to faith, and no circumstance can stop believers from living in total victory here on earth” (Bowler 2018, p. 7).

However, despite these American roots, Prosperity Theology has particularities in Latin America and in the rest of the world where it has further developed.¹⁹ In the case of Latin American Pentecostalism, this type of theological discourse tends to assert itself more strongly in urban environments, where the Pentecostal ritual of “sowing” has been widely accepted. According to this practice, there is a proportional relationship between God’s blessing and the economic donations of the faithful. The ability to raise money becomes, therefore, one of the skills that Pentecostal pastors must cultivate. In Latin America, the television channel *Enlace*, with its long media days called “Marathons” has

widely promoted this practice, in which believers exchange divine blessings for economic donations.²⁰

With all of the above, this theological orientation functions as a fundamental force in the fabrication of contemporary neoliberal subjectivities. The subjectivity of the new believer flows easily between the contours of a religious agent and an economic agent. As Semán points out, “Prosperity Theology does no more than bring into the realm of economic life the ‘empowerment’ effect that has been generally attributed to conversion to Pentecostalism” (Semán 2005, p. 80).

The risk, of course, is that faith can become just another neoliberal practice based on the calculation of investments and credits. In this case, the believer would seem to get completely lost in the structure of the debtor–creditor relationship typical of neoliberal subjectivity, with the particularity that God would occupy the place of a provider of economic and material desires oriented to a prosperous life (Spadaro and Figueroa 2018); a provider that goes hand in hand, moreover, with the need of the *Homo Neoliberalis* to permanently improve his position in the competitive context of neoliberal society. Studies have revealed how in some Pentecostal communities, believers understand their faith to be substantially connected to their participation in the financial market through the acquisition of microcredits with organizations linked to their churches. Thus, “Earning credit through internal cultivation of the self as a means of fiscal improvement is the guiding logic of Christian microfinance, because correct fiscal practice is framed as evidence of proper spiritual alignment” (Bartel 2021, p. 39).²¹

Prosperity Theology operates then as a theological device in which all *Homo Neoliberalis* can see their desires for stability, health, and economic abundance sanctified and spiritualized in a covenant with a God that does not include structural modifications of current socioeconomic conditions and that is based on an optimistic vision of the capabilities of the *Homo Neoliberalis* to receive God’s blessings. These blessings, insofar as they will imply health and economic abundance, will be fundamental in the *Homo Neoliberalis*’ path of constant improvement and social ascent. Thus, Prosperity Theology “works like modern self-help techniques that aim at strengthening an individual personal instance in a changing world in which the streamlining of reflexes that link people to the marketplace seems to be a condition of social insertion” (Semán 2005, p. 81).²²

This already suggests that the fundamental features and orientations of Prosperity Theology extend to other contemporary religious and spiritual manifestations, such as, for example, the so-called *New Age* movement which, like Pentecostalism, has also grown notably in Latin America in recent decades.²³ This movement, which is as multiple as Pentecostalism, seems to coincide with the latter in a general orientation towards intramundane well-being, by making available to the believers “a wide range of techniques aimed at maintaining harmony between body and mind, cultivating health and beauty and prolonging youth” (Beltrán 2013, p. 113). Here the idea of prosperity also has a strong individual accent and the social consequences of prosperity are similarly based on the hope that the transformation of individuals will bring about social transformation. Although unlike Pentecostal Christianity, the idea of salvation does not need to be present in *New Age* spirituality, they do share the same ethical principle, namely, the acceptance that “the reorganization of their own life around a belief system—the subjective reorganization of their world—is the first and most important step for the objective—universal—reorganization of the world” (Beltrán 2013, p. 117).

(ii) The Neoliberal Church-Firm as the Organizational Model for the Neoliberal Religiosity

As discussed above, according to Brown, one of the fundamental characteristics of neoliberal rationality is that both individuals and states organize themselves under the model of the contemporary firm. This means that “both are expected to behave themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value, and (...) do so through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors” (Brown 2015, p. 22). If these guidelines are not followed, both individuals and

states face phenomena such as fiscal crises, loss of legitimacy and creditworthiness, and, in extreme cases, bankruptcy and dissolution.

It is not surprising that due to the difficulties it has had in adapting to the new neoliberal conditions, the Catholic Church has lost strength in Latin America, at least in comparison with other religious communities. These difficulties derive, to a large extent, from its deeply bureaucratic and hierarchical institutional nature.

Contrastingly, the institutional flexibility of Pentecostal churches has allowed them to adapt more easily to the neoliberal model of the firms. Empirical studies have shown that in Pentecostal organizations the autonomy of local congregations is privileged as a way of encouraging the capacity for self-governance, self-sustainability, and self-propagation. This model also allows successful Pentecostal leaders to become independent from their organizations of origin and found their own congregations (Beltrán 2013, p. 148).²⁴ This is why in Pentecostal communities, training in “church growth” has been a topic of great relevance in every seminary, Bible institute, or theological school; a training that refers to the techniques and strategies that make a congregation grow and that are based, to a large extent, on the marketing techniques identified by the evangelical leader Juan Rojas in 1989. These techniques refer basically to: (i) define clear and achievable goals, (ii) delimit the target population segment, (iii) establish the leadership potential, (iv) study the successful strategies implemented by other religious communities in the same territory, (v) be aware of one’s own strengths and weaknesses in the context delineated by the previous strategy, (vi) establish a specific strategy to improve competitiveness based on clear and precise plans and goals, (vii) communicate these plans with the community to commit it to them, and (viii) periodically evaluate the processes and results and make adjustments based on these evaluations (Beltrán 2013, p. 225).

Pentecostal organizations tend to operate in a general framework that goes from an extreme characterized by a high level of informality and simple infrastructure to another extreme where we find more notable levels of institutionalization and hierarchies, as in the case of the so-called “mega-churches”, which are the ones with the highest potential to expand their services to include seminaries, schools, radio stations, training programs of all sorts, and bookstores.²⁵ Nonetheless, even in the cases of these mega-churches, bureaucratization is scarce, especially if compared to that of the less successful religious communities, such as other Protestant Churches or the Catholic Church.

Neoliberal subjectivity is much more akin to this type of flexible and unbureaucratic organization and can no longer be easily “located in administrative classificatory systems, distributed into categories according to qualitative criteria, allocated to the compartments of the exhaustive charts of private and public industrial bureaucracy” (Dardot and Laval 2013, pp. 309–10).

Additionally, a key element of the neoliberal organizational model of the firms is the special way in which leadership is exercised. As Dardot and Laval point out, “The novelty of entrepreneurial government consists in the general, transversal, systematic character of the kind of leadership based on individual responsibility and self-control” (Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 309).

Within the bureaucratic and hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church leaderships are appointed from the top, and the communities do not have a clear influence on them. Thus, the possibility of admitting new leaderships from social actors much closer to the communities is very low. Something similar occurs in the case of the historical Latin American Protestant Churches, which also sustain their leadership in established hierarchies and in institutionalized professionalization processes that accompany the rationalization of their dogmas and the standardization of their liturgies (Beltrán 2013, p. 130). In contrast, the empirical studies of Pentecostal Churches have found that Pentecostal pastors’ leaderships are distinguished by being very close to the rest of the community. In the studies where Pentecostal believers have been consulted about the advantages of their churches, many point out that they appreciate in their churches the fact that there is not a hierarchy but a “ministerial ladder” (*escalera ministerial*). This strengthens and validates their aspirations to

ascend such a “ladder” until they become pastors. For them, this marks a sharp difference with the rigidity of the Catholic church, where the priest is perceived as a distant figure (Sarrazin and Arango 2017, p. 44).

Although in Pentecostal churches the charismatic authority of the pastor profoundly differentiates him/her from the rest of the believers, this hierarchy is flattened by the generalized distribution of the gifts of the Holy Ghost that can be equally exercised by the other members of the religious community. “This makes religious charisma a profitable capital in Pentecostalism. Thus, because of their charisma, believers lacking economic and cultural capital can stand out within the group, in a dynamic that allows, among other things, the rise of women to positions of power in Pentecostal organizations” (Beltrán 2013, p. 148).

Pentecostalism’s horizontality certainly has significant democratic potential. However, it should also be noted that in the subjectivity of the *Homo Neoliberalis*, homogenization presupposes social processes of horizontalization. Although, as noted above, equality is not a fundamental principle of the neoliberal normative order, neoliberalism does have an equalizing effect insofar as it is a rationality that eliminates differences. As Brown points out, neoliberalism is not a rationality that promotes individuals. “Instead, the notion of individuals naturally pursuing their interests has been replaced with the production through governance of responsabilized citizens who appropriately self-invest in a context of macroeconomic vicissitudes and needs that make all of these investments into practices of speculation” (Brown 2015, p. 84). Thus, the equalizing force of neoliberalism consists in leading human subjects to conceive of themselves based on the model of a potentially successful and prosperous human capital able to achieve all kinds of victories in the competitive context of neoliberalism. Naturally, in all competitive processes there will be winners and losers and, as the last decades have clearly shown, from an economic point of view, people who were already rich have seen their wealth significantly increase. According to Oxfam’s (2019) report entitled “Public Good or Private Wealth”, the wealth of the world’s billionaires increased by USD 900 billion in the year 2018; meanwhile, the wealth of the poorest half of humanity, 3.8 billion people, fell by 11%. The economic gaps between the firms’ CEOs and the “regular workers” are almost insurmountable and they seem to be sustained, to a large extent, on the basis that the latter conceive of themselves, on the one hand, as capable of rising to a CEO’s position and, on the other, as CEOs of themselves. As Dardot and Laval point out, the *Homo Neoliberalis* “must govern himself from within through a technical rationalization of his relationship to himself. Being a ‘personal entrepreneur’ means that one succeeds in making oneself the optimal instrument of one’s own social and professional success” (Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 309).

(iii) The Emotivity of the Expression of the Neoliberal Religiosities

An additional element that, according to Latin American sociologists of religion, makes Pentecostal communities different, especially compared to both traditional strands of Catholic doctrine (including Liberation Theology) and historical Protestantism, is the offering of a deeply emotive religious experience accessible to all believers, which is manifested in a whole series of rituals that constitute “the hallmark of Pentecostalism” (Robbins 2009). These rituals, moreover, are often the main target of mockery and stigmatization by outside observers and members of other religions (Muñoz and Fernández-Mostaza 2018).

In contrast to a specialist discourse that largely presupposes a potentially exclusionary dualism between the theologically expert (or the liberated) and the ignorant (or alienated), Pentecostalism, especially through the praxis of glossolalia, preaching, and testimonies, offers an emotional and functional communicative system that promises to produce religious ecstasies accessible to all. This is why Pentecostalism has come to be regarded as an “anti-intellectual” religious manifestation that rejects theological scholarship and favors “the Spirit over the letter” (Richie 2020).

However, it is more accurate to indicate that this strong ritualistic dimension of Pentecostalism evidences the connections between religious activity, play (Vondrey 2018), and enjoyment. Dardot and Laval pointed out that the neoliberal subject is produced by the

“performance-joy” device insofar as it is a subjectivity oriented to produce and enjoy more and more. “Life itself, in all its aspects, becomes the object of apparatuses of performance and pleasure” (Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 313). Therefore, in the experience of the *Homo Neoliberalis*, which, as Brown indicates, “operates in a context replete with risk, contingency, and potentially violent changes, from burst bubbles and capital or currency meltdowns to wholesale industry dissolution” (Brown 2015, p.84), it should not be surprising that a religiosity such as Pentecostalism is the fastest growing in Latin America.

Pentecostal congregations constitute spaces for catharsis and emotional discharge based, as noted above, on their theological interpretation of the ability of the gifts of the Holy Ghost to manifest themselves and make the power of God immanent and tangible. “In order to achieve this manifestation of the Spirit, effervescent liturgies are conducted (worship sessions, vigils, days of prayer, etc.), in which most of the community actively participates. In this context, highly spontaneous ritual practices take place, marked by the predominance of orality, bodily movements, and emotion (Poewe 1989; Mossière 2007), and these even acquire ecstatic connotations at times” (Muñoz and Fernández-Mostaza 2018, p. 3).²⁶

As a corollary of the above, the success of Pentecostal leaders (and therefore the growth of their churches) depends, to a large extent, on their ability to manage and offer this type of experience. These are, therefore, communities where the pastor must respond very efficiently to the emotional demands of his/her community of believers (Moreira 2018). The Pentecostal leader “is not distinguished from the laity by her educational level, professional training, or priestly tradition, but by her natural authority or charisma, and her success depends on her ability to attract believers who certify her. For this reason, the charismatic leader must constantly “conquer” and “reconquer” the faithfulness of the followers” (Beltrán 2013, p. 123). She does this, especially, through (i) emotional displays of power related to the control of diseases and demons, (ii) emotional displays of his ability to communicate with God, (iii) evidence of a strong coherence between his lifestyle and the message he preaches, and (iv) displays of his ability to persuade through oratory and mass management. The latter includes a successful use of the new digital technologies available as well as the marketing strategies indicated before.

Now, in this context, where neoliberal religiosity seems to demand a high level of emotive expressiveness, it is not surprising that Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR), that is, the Pentecostal face of Catholicism, is the Catholic current that has grown the most in recent years (Chestnut 2003). According to the Pew Research Survey, “a median of 40% of Catholics across Latin America say they are “charismatic,” a term used to describe Catholics who incorporate beliefs and practices associated with Pentecostalism into their worship” (13).²⁷

Charismatic Pentecostalism also emphasizes the capacities of permanent renewal available for the believer given the gifts or charisms of the Holy Ghost. To renew means “to return to the sources to experience Pentecost, that event in which the divine spiritual possession represented in tongues of fire and manifestations of glossolalia by those initiated into Christianity is symbolized” (Urrego-Romero 2019, p. 388). Consequently, similar to Pentecostalism, religiosity is predominantly manifested in the “assemblies” in which ecstatic experiences of happiness, healing and overflowing joy are shared.²⁸

(iv) Neoliberal religiosity throughout all Latin American social classes

There is still a widespread belief that Pentecostalism is, above all, a religion for the economically disadvantaged. This seems to be confirmed by statistical data from some Latin American countries; Colombia, for example, is, for now, the case of a country where Pentecostal churches such as the United Pentecostal Church of Colombia and the World Missionary Movement have had a great reception in the most economically depressed sectors. Sociologists of religion usually explain this because these religious communities (a) constitute sources of meaning in the face of anomie and rootlessness while creating spaces for the construction of solidarity networks, (b) become substitute families that compensate for experiences of social disintegration and motivate believers to improve their conditions

of existence, and (c) provide social services that help to cover for the material needs of vulnerable sectors and stand as spaces of security in the face of violence (Beltrán 2013, p. 171).

Nevertheless, in other countries, Pentecostalism has been a religious phenomenon that has covered the middle and upper classes as well (Berberían 2002).²⁹ Even in Colombia, a profound impact of the new Pentecostal churches has already begun to be seen in the middle classes.³⁰ This should not be surprising since the uncertainty of neoliberal society is generalized, as Castro-Gómez notes:

Homo economicus lives dangerously because they ignore what may happen to them tomorrow or the day after tomorrow; because they know that their actions depend on “accidents” against which they can do nothing. The only thing they know they can do is to occupy themselves with the present, follow their own desires and remain faithful to their passionate nature. (151)

In the case of Colombia, Pentecostal churches such as *La Casa sobre la Roca*, the *Cruzada Estudiantil y Profesional de Colombia*, and *El Lugar de Su Presencia* are examples of churches that have successfully penetrated the middle and even upper social classes where they have found professionals exposed to unemployment and the pauperization of the labor market, and businessmen and traders suffering from market fluctuations (Beltrán 2013, p. 181).

Nonetheless, to these social classes, neoliberalism has also offered other religious or spiritual alternatives, such as the mystical-esoteric practices of the so-called *New Age* movements, which, as well as Pentecostalism, have also had significant growth since the 1970s.³¹ According to Raschke, these practices constitute “one of the most significant, yet still largely unanalysed, interfaces between the neoliberal economy and neoliberal culture” (Raschke 2019, p. 145).

Since the 1970s, while in the popular sectors Pentecostalism began to appear as a new religious phenomenon that pluralized Latin American Christianity, in the urban middle sectors the diversification of the Latin American religious field began to show the appearance of *New Age* practices. Among this diversity of practices are those inspired by Eastern religiosities such as yoga and reiki, self-help or self-improvement currents that mix psychological and religious elements, divinatory practices related to astrology and tarot, and, especially in Latin America, neo-indigenous and neo-Shamanic practices connected with the use of ayahuasca (or yagé), and other rites of the native peoples.

Religious or spiritual *New Age* practices,³² initially inspired by United States countercultural elements critical of materialism and capitalist consumerism, suffered a reorientation in the 1980s. Its initial criticism of the dominant economic system gave way to the affirmation of personal change as a vehicle for social transformation and of the human capacity to resignify daily experience in a causal logic of suffering and well-being based on the language of flow or energetic blockage (Semán and Viotti 2015, p. 86). With this, all these practices were linked to the logic of the market and consumption at the same time that they were massified.

Neoliberal flexibility allows, in these cases, to combine practices and beliefs from different traditions to build a magical-spiritual package tailored to the believer’s needs (Beltrán 2013, p. 110). Moreover, these are practices that, in principle, do not need to be exercised collectively and even allow practitioners to consider themselves as atheists or agnostics³³ or to integrate them into traditional forms of religiosity.³⁴ As Semán points out:

(...) its growth by dispersion without centralization or unique formats becomes the object of appropriations and recreations that do not form a religious segment clearly distinct from the others. By its own ideology, promoter of the most diverse forms of compatibilization, it operates by including other religious principles or by making it possible for other religious institutions to introduce *New Age* principles into their ideology and rituals. (Semán 2005, p. 93)

As practices connected to neoliberal religiosity, moreover, the practices of *New Age* movements circulate successfully through digital technologies and mass media and generally coincide in preaching social ascent, health, well-being, and economic prosperity as aspects that can be achieved through a positive mental attitude and life practices consistent with this attitude (Beltrán 2013, p. 117). As a functional practice to the normative order of neoliberal reason, *New Age* religiosity or spirituality grants the neoliberal subjects strategies that allow them to accept and cope with social tensions and continue producing and enjoying despite them; strategies that are usually based on the following premises accepted, in one way or another, by the diversity of *New Age* practices: “an individual decides his/her own reality; an individual should rely only on his/ her own authority; an individual has full responsibility for his/her own life; the individual has enormous capacity/potential/force just waiting to be fully expressed...” (Ahlin 2013, p. 179).

5. Final Remarks

Here I have presented a characterization of neoliberalism as a rationality that promotes a special type of process of human subjectivation, namely, that of the neoliberal *Homo Oeconomicus*. From this point of view, constructed especially from the reflections of Brown and Dardot-Laval, neoliberalism can be seen as a socio-political process through which the conditions of possibility have been created that allow us to understand the human experience under the model of financial capital. This transcendental conception of neoliberalism shows how human subjectivity runs the risk of understanding itself predominantly, and from there the outside world, as an economic agent that, in all time and space, finds itself in a context of investment and improvement concerning itself and of competition concerning other neoliberal subjects. This is what it means that neoliberal subjectivity can be understood as the predominance of the *Homo Neoliberalis*.

Within this conceptual framework, in the second part of the text, I discussed the connections between religion and this type of subjectivity in the context of the changes that have occurred in the Latin American religious field in recent decades. To explore this question, I relied on social studies that have described these changes and that, to a large extent, have focused on the growth of Pentecostal Protestantism. These studies allowed me to show the deep connections between the changes in Latin American religiosity and the development of neoliberalism insofar as the religiosity of the Latin American *Homo Neoliberalis*, to a large extent, has taken the form of the creditor–debtor relationship and has been marked by an orientation towards prosperity and material well-being sustained by immanentist theological principles; orientation that, nevertheless, has not been effective in stopping Latin America from being the most unequal region in the world.³⁵ In any case, as noted above, inequality, beyond the threshold of the “potentially entrepreneur–citizens”, is not a central concern for neoliberalism.

Although the theoretical sources I have used focus predominantly on the Pentecostal churches, I have shown that the religiosity of the Latin American *Homo Neoliberalis* cannot be simplistically equated with Pentecostalism, especially as part of an international conspiracy to impose neoliberalism in Latin America. If we try to find those responsible for the neoliberal expansion in our subcontinent, we should not forget, for example, the complicit role played by the Catholic Church in sustaining the dictatorships of the Southern Cone, which were fundamental for the implementation of the economic policies of neoliberalism, as well as the in the weakening of Liberation Theology (Botero et al. 2021). It is not appropriate that, by focusing on the functioning of the Pentecostal churches and highlighting their economic orientations, we forget all the ways in which the Catholic church and other religious groups also function under the neoliberal model of the firm.

A smaller but very insightful part of Latin American social studies on religion and Pentecostalism has warned against the reductionisms and stereotypes that tend to take place when studying the Pentecostal phenomenon (Panotto 2021). Pentecostalism itself, as an analytical category and as an object of research, has very porous limits; numerous researchers have evidenced the conceptual and analytical weaknesses of the category

(Jaimes Martínez 2012) and others prefer to use the category of “neo-Pentecostal” to describe religious communities in which the theology of prosperity is fundamental and which have been strongly inserted in the Latin American public space since the 1980s (Oro 2018, p. 413).

It is not accurate, then, to identify “Pentecostal” with “Neoliberal”. Although the rise of Pentecostalism is a phenomenon that helps us to understand the religiosity of the Latin American *Homo Neoliberalis*, we cannot discard the possibility that what the majority of the social studies on Pentecostalism are describing is nothing more than the most visible dimensions of the successful instrumentalization by neoliberalism of a religious manifestation that, although it has elements akin to neoliberalism (its immanentist orientation, for example), it also has many others that are reactive toward the neoliberal order of things.³⁶ The same can also be said of the Latin American *New Age* movements.³⁷

Nor should we rule out the possibility that the academic accounts that emphasize the neoliberal elements in Pentecostalism suffer themselves from the very evil they (we) wish to denounce. As Raschke warns, “Our failure as academics to see clearly can be deduced straightaway from our own profound complicity in the perpetuation of the neoliberal empire itself... We have without doubt met the enemy, and it is ourselves” (Raschke 2019, p. 11). In other words, the academic tendency to see neoliberal elements in the Pentecostal churches may also be due to the kind of neoliberal lenses that we contemporary academics have learned to use so masterfully and efficiently. We should not underestimate, then, the strength that in recent years the so-called economic approach to religion has taken in the sociology of religion in Latin America, which is easily reflected, for example, in the recurrent use of expressions such as “Catholic monopoly”, “religious supply”, “religious consumer”, “religious market”, “salvation goods market”, and the like.³⁸

We need, therefore, theoretical accounts able to capture the contemporary religious subjectivities that can react and go beyond neoliberalism’s influences, which implies having a sufficiently broad investigative view to note all those cases in which contemporary Latin American religious and spiritual manifestations (Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals) show their full critical potential on the basis of which they can resignify, and even transcend, neoliberalism.³⁹

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Notes

- ¹ It should be noted that before Brown’s book, the French philosophers and sociologists Christian Laval and Pierre Dardot had already put forward a similar proposal in their book, *La nouvelle raison du monde*, albeit with a particular focus on Europe. In any case, they recognize in their book that Brown’s text, entitled *Les habits neufs de la politique mondiale. Néolibéralisme et néoconservatisme*, was an essential element in formulating their own understanding of neoliberalism (Dardot and Laval 2013, p. 23).
- ² Gauthier (2020, 2021), and Gauthier and Martikainen (2013a, 2013b, 2018) are some of the key references in the scholarly discussion on the impacts of neoliberalism and religion. My text aims to expand this existing scholarship by adding a Latin American perspective based on the studies developed by Latin American sociologists of religion. A similar attempt can be seen in Burity (2013).
- ³ Raschke, for instance, unlike Brown, substantially links Keynesianism to neoliberalism (Raschke 2019, p. 25).
- ⁴ Raschke, on the other hand, draws attention to the danger that the acceptance of this economic language conceals precisely the values that lie behind it: “Neoliberalism is really not about economics, but about values, instantiating them in almost invisible routines of symbolic exchange that have profound economic effects (. . .) In short, homo neoliberalismus only wears the colorful costumes of classical homo economicus” (Raschke 2019, p. 17). Raschke also warns that focusing too much on the subjectivity produced by neoliberalism may imply ignoring the institutional mechanisms that sustain it and make it possible. That is, focusing too much on *Homo Oeconomicus* may lead us to remain in the description of the “sheep” and forget the “shepherding” system (Raschke 2019, p. 42).

- 5 This is why, in neoliberalism, as Castro-Gómez sees it, inequalities “are seen as ‘functional’ to the economy, since, allegedly, they trigger creativity and encourage competition” (Castro-Gómez 2010, p. 190). Hence, neoliberal rationality is not interested in eliminating inequality or combating it beyond trying to ensure that few people fall into the “absolute poverty threshold” in which it is no longer possible for them to “play as economic agents”. Thus, a policy of subsidies or even basic income may be compatible with neoliberal rationality because the “important thing here is not relative poverty, but to avoid the increase of absolute poverty, by establishing a “subsistence threshold”, that is, by distinguishing between “entrepreneur-citizens” (situated above the threshold) and “potentially entrepreneur-citizens” (situated below the threshold, but who will leave it through subsidies). This “threshold”, then, functions as a “safety floor”. If a citizen is above the threshold, then she does not require help of any kind: she must play according to the rules of the game valid for the whole society and guaranteed by the State” (Castro-Gómez 2010, p. 189).
- 6 For Foucault, the development of neoliberalism, in connection with classical liberalism, can be seen as the triumph of *Homo Oeconomicus* over *Homo Juridicus*. Brown’s proposal, and an aspect in which she differentiates her thought from that of Foucault, consists in rescuing a third subject that Foucault does not sufficiently note, namely, *Homo Politicus*.
- 7 In the words of Castro-Gómez: “with the emergence of neoliberalism in the twentieth century, being a citizen will no longer be a matter of “rights”, but a matter of “entrepreneurship”...” (Castro-Gómez 2010, p. 146).
- 8 It is generally accepted that the first stage of neoliberalism in Latin America began with the Chilean dictatorship of Pinochet and his incorporation of the economic policies recommended by the so-called “Chicago Boys”.
- 9 The “Religion in Latin America” survey conducted by the Pew Forum in 2014 showed that 19% of Latin Americans consider themselves Protestant. Likewise, the survey showed that there are important variations in the different countries (for example: Honduras 41%, Guatemala 41%, El Salvador 36%, Brazil 26%, Chile 17%, Argentina 15%, Colombia 13%, Mexico 9%).
- 10 It is important to note, in any case, the usually unrecognized diversity among Latin American evangelical groups. The theological positions of the so-called “radical evangelicals” (Orlando Costas, Samuel Escobar, René Padilla, among others) would perhaps force us to nuance this description. In this regard, see Salinas (2007).
- 11 This feast, however, has Jewish origins: Pentecost, which comes from the Greek *pentekostos* (fiftieth), refers to the annual Jewish feast also known as “the Feast of Weeks” (*Shavuot*), which is celebrated fifty days after God’s appearance on the Mount Sinai and after the Passover. For this reason, Pentecost commemorates the giving of the commandments to the People of Israel and marks and celebrates the time when the first fruits of the harvest begin to be harvested. The biblical source of this feast is found in Leviticus 23:15–22.
- 12 Bergunder (2009) provides a valuable compilation and application of the most relevant sociological macro-theories to explain the growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America.
- 13 Within the context of the *coup d’état* that occurred in Bolivia in 2019, Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel stated, in an interview with Carmen Aristegui in 2019, that “Evangelical” groups were the new weapon of the United States to carry out *coups d’état* in Latin American countries. Dussel uses the term “Evangelicals” to refer, in Bonino’s terminology, to both Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism. See <https://www.aporrea.org/internacionales/n349023.html> (Last Accessed: 10 November 2021). Bonino, for his part, points out that this hypothesis, called by some the “conspiracy hypothesis”, has been proposed many times by “Roman Catholic polemicists” and “Marxist thinkers” (Bonino 1995, p. 12).
- 14 For this reason, it has been affirmed that Latin American Pentecostals are closer to Latin American popular and eclectic religiosity than to Protestantism itself (Beltrán 2007).
- 15 These studies are numerous and vary in their approaches, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and methodologies. For my arguments I will rely, in particular, on the following texts: Marzal (2002), Chestnut (2003), Espinosa (2004), Algranti (2007), Bergunder (2009), Parker (2013), Beltrán (2013), Lindhardt (2016), Freston (2016), Morello et al. (2017), Somma et al. (2017), Baptista and Ospina (2017), pp. 11–106 in Guadalupe and Grundberger (2018), Moreira (2018), Muñoz and Fernández-Mostaza (2018), Semán (2019), and Frigerio (2019), as well as in the study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2014). Among all these, I will highlight the study by Beltrán (2013) for its systematicity, its deep empirical component, and the detailed description of its sources and objects of study.
- 16 See for example, Campos (2000), Gago (2013), García-Ruiz and Michel (2014), Pérez (2016), and Spadaro and Figueroa (2017). In any case, it should be noted that the texts that emphasize this element are usually the most critical of Pentecostalism and, in many cases, their empirical foundations are very limited.
- 17 This is the translation of an excerpt from an interview with pastor Hernando Zapata published in Baptista and Ospina (2017, p. 223).
- 18 Bergunder (2009) presents some brief reflections on the similarities and differences between Liberation Theology and Pentecostal movements in Latin America.
- 19 The same can be seen in African Pentecostalism. Frahm-Arp (2018) shows that three types of prosperity theology can be found in South Africa, namely, “abilities prosperity”, “progress prosperity”, and “miracle prosperity”. Each of these places different emphases on the material achievements of believers. Despite the different sociological studies that exist in Latin America on Pentecostalism, studies that, as I have pointed out, are part of the basis of my reflections in this text, I did not find in them any analyses oriented to evidence the different nuances of this theological framework in Latin American Pentecostal communities.

- 20 It is worth noting, as Beltrán points out, that the “sowing is in continuity with traditional Catholic customs of rural origin, such as the tithe and the first fruits, rituals through which Catholics ensured good harvests and fertility of the fields. It is also in continuity with rituals that Catholics still use today to attract divine favors, such as penances, sacrifices, and promises, rituals according to which no blessing is free” (Beltrán 2013, p. 146).
- 21 According to Bartel, one of her interviewees, Remedios, states that “‘Credit is necessary for prosperity’, she continued, ‘and I know my God wants prosperity for my family. You have to have faith’. The faith in prosperity Remedios held was based in the many microcredits she has cultivated over the years, covering one debt with another, demonstrating her debt-worthiness to as many different organizations and institutions as she could manage. ‘Prosperity is impossible without debt, and I believe in credit, yo creo en el credito’, Remedios shared with me that same afternoon, illustrating once again the deeply embedded conviction that debt, in the realm of Christian microfinance, is intimately entangled with faith” (34). These microcredits are generally offered at very high interest rates. According to Bartel, while the 2019 usury limit for Colombia’s commercial credit card interest rates sat at 28.98%, Remedios’ microcredit had an interest rate of 54.83% (35).
- 22 In this text, Semán correctly points out that the notion of secularization should be at the center of the debate on the meaning of the expansion of Pentecostalism in Latin America. I consider this to be completely correct, although, in this text, for reasons of space, I do not address this issue.
- 23 According to Semán, prosperity theology is the “unfolding of a formation that crosses the whole of Pentecostal (and evangelical in general) denominations” (Semán 2005, p. 73). However, it would be necessary to be more radical and indicate that this formation has crossed in the last decades the whole set of contemporary religiosities and spiritualities; something that, in any case, is suggested by Semán himself when he shows the similarities between this theology and the *New Age* movements.
- 24 Some studies have attempted to compare the horizontal and popular functioning of the Pentecostal churches with the Catholic Church’s Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) created largely as a product of Liberation Theology in Latin America. These communities were organizations oriented especially to the populations of the urban and economic peripheries in order to make possible the gathering of believers without the direct mediation of priests. Nevertheless, the Basic Ecclesial Communities have not had a success comparable to that of the Pentecostal churches. One of the reasons for this is the noticeable difference that has always existed between the Catholic officials who promote and accompany them, inspired by Liberation Theology, and the believers who participate in them (Bergunder 2009, p. 13).
- 25 As Moreira found for the Brazilian case, “Some well-established middle class Pentecostal churches, such as Videira, Fountain of Life, Heal our Land, and others, besides their services and worship, offer technical capacitation courses, psychological and financial orientation, workshops on conflict resolution, initiatives on garbage recycling, and seminaries on administration techniques. They also have job and incubator agencies and develop and sell church managing material and even computer programs” (Moreira 2018, p. 6).
- 26 According to Moreira: “Religious services have turned into planned spectacles, even in the minimal details. Especially in urban peripheries, where the State doesn’t establish pleasant green parks and embellishment measures, people seek religious Pentecostal services that are beautiful, cheerful, happy, funny, and in both senses sensational. This corresponds perfectly to the need for joyful, energetic, strong emotional and delightful experiences sought by the youth” (7).
- 27 Other surveys (Thorsen 2016) indicate that this number is closer to 16%. It is worth noting that, despite this also very interesting change experienced in the Latin American religious landscape, the magnifying glass of social research has come less close to it compared to the interest raised by the growth of Pentecostalism.
- 28 In any case, a profound difference between the CCR and the Pentecostal Churches is that the former maintain the hierarchy of the Magisterium, that is, the valid teachings of the Catholic Church backed by the authority and orthodoxy of the bishops and the Pope. This includes, for example, the request made by Pope John Paul II to place at the center of this movement the Virgin Mary as its patroness to distinguish the CCR from the Pentecostal Churches (Thorsen 2016, p. 465).
- 29 This is especially the case in some Central American countries.
- 30 For the case of Chile, see Vega (2016).
- 31 Compared to research on the growth of Pentecostalism, academic studies on New Age movements in Latin America are relatively scarce. In addition to those I will cite below, the most recognized and referenced social studies in the Latin American debate may include Carozzi (2000), Sarrazin (2012, 2017), De la Torre et al. (2013), Viotti and Funes (2016), Funes (2016), Steil et al. (2018), and Gracia (2020).
- 32 In the context of *New Age* practices, it is common to prefer the use of the term “spirituality” instead of “religiosity”. On this distinction and its connections with New Age movements, see Frigerio (2016). It is worth noting how some Pentecostal believers identify “religion” with Catholicism and its institutionalism and bureaucratic hierarchy. Hence, for many of them, their belief is not really a religion but a direct relationship with God (Sarrazin and Arango 2017, p. 44).
- 33 According to Beltrán’s study (Beltrán 2013), 48% of people who commonly engage in these practices conceive themselves as agnostic.
- 34 Renée de la Torre presents an excerpt from an interview with a Mexican catholic close to New Age practices who states: “I consider myself a catholic, I enjoy mass very much, but now I see it differently, with more knowledge. For example, when it comes to giving us peace, we are closing energy, and what is the amen if not a mantra” (De la Torre 2012, p. 202).

- 35 Cf. Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, Informe regional sobre desarrollo humano para América Latina y el Caribe (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 2010): Actuar sobre el futuro: romper la transmisión intergeneracional de la desigualdad, Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo (2010, p. 16).
- 36 Mansilla and Luis (2019), for example, propose to distinguish between “Pentecostalism” and “the Pentecostal”. The former refers, in general terms, to what is described in this text, the latter, on the other hand, refers to a spontaneous, oral, emotional, and local religiosity oriented towards the dignification of the oppressed, exploited, and excluded.
- 37 As Gutiérrez points out, in Latin America the *New Age* movement also has a strong strand “oriented towards the recovery of the continent’s original indigenous cultures, whose civilization is imagined and reinvented—as the East once was—in light of the need for alternatives to a Western modernity that is predatory, materialistic and excluding of otherness and that is not only devoid of promise but threatens self-annihilation” (Gutiérrez 2018, p. 425).
- 38 For a critical account of the use of the notion of “market” in academic discussions of religion, see Moberg and Martikainen (2018).
- 39 For the Colombian case, we could cite, as examples, the research by Beltrán and Cuervo (2016) and Plata (2018), both referring to the role of Pentecostalism in a rural context of violence. Plata’s study shows the case of a Pentecostal Church, the Evangelical Foursquare Church, which, faced with the arrival of drug trafficking and paramilitary groups in its region, oriented its preaching of individual conversion towards a community faith practice of social organization and peaceful resistance. In Aguirre (2021), I propose some academic parameters to carry out decolonial discussions of religions and theologies.

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