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'Bleeding Catholicism': Liberation Theology's Demise and the Emergence of Pentecostalism in Latin America

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Abstract: This essay examines the apparent decline of Liberation theology and the rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America. Due to the retreat of Liberation theology from the forefront of public discourse in 1989 and the larger loss of emancipatory philosophy, Catholicism in Latin America has experienced bleeding, losing adherence to charismatic religions over time. Through an examination of the socio-religious landscape, this study seeks to determine whether there is any relationship between the growth of Pentecostalism and the demise of Liberation theology in a Neoliberal Age. This study aims to shed light on the complex relationships that exist between social shifts, religious concepts, the evolving religious landscape, and the social order in Latin America.

Keywords: liberation theology; Latin America; Pentecostalism; Catholicism; neoliberalism; social imaginaries

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1. Introduction

The 21st century is a period of crossroads and transformation (Ten Kate and Van Den Hemel 2020, p. 259). The same is true for religion as well. The latter half of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century brought about several changes in the religious landscape, particularly in Latin America since the apparent demise and defeat of Liberation theology in the late 1980s.

Liberation theology, with its emphasis on social justice, solidarity with the poor, and critiques of oppressive structures, provided a powerful framework for the Catholic Church's engagement with social and political issues in Latin America. However, the influence of Liberation theology started to decline gradually in the 1980s, suffering a dialectical process of defeat. The charismatic and Pentecostal groups grew in strength as a result of progressive Catholicism losing its primary strength in response to real-world society at the time.

This article analyses the socio-religious transformations taking place in Latin America, examining the factors that have contributed to the growth of Pentecostalism. To understand the attractiveness of Pentecostalism to vulnerable groups, this article focuses on the promise of individual empowerment, up-close spiritual encounters, and a sense of community related with the new social imaginaries brought by neoliberalism. In order to do so, we will try to rely on the main works on the subject (Stoll 1990; Martin 1990; Mariz 1994; Bastian 1994, 1997; Lehmann 1996; Cox 2001; Hartch 2014; Aguirre 2021; Zegarra 2023b), as well as on the quantitative studies available (Pew Research Center 2014; Latinbarometro 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020).

This study aims to explore the socio-religious landscape and investigate whether a correlation exists between the surge of Pentecostalism and the defeat of Liberation theology. The purpose is, then, to delve into the dynamics surrounding the decline of Liberation theology (Lernoux 1982, 1990; Smith 1991; Reed 2017; Zegarra 2023a) and the subsequent rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America. This study seeks to unravel the underlying factors that contribute to the gradual erosion of Catholicism's dominance in the region by studying the material conditions in which this phenomenon takes place (Marx 1981; Rosa 2009, 2013,

2016; Rosa and Scheuerman 2009; Heinrich 2012; Chodor 2015; Dardot and Laval 2017; Prusik 2022a, 2022b; Brown 2017; Mau 2023), as well as the discursive disappearance of its imaginaries (Taylor 2004; Steger 2008; Bourdieu and Gutiérrez 2010; Latré 2018; Bourdieu 2019; Ten Kate and Van Den Hemel 2020) in a secular context (Taylor 2018; Ruiz Andrés 2022b, 2022a; Casanova 1994, 2012, 2017; Beaumont et al. 2020; Beaumont 2019; Hodkinson and Horstkotte 2020; Staudigl 2020).

This study, thus, aims to provide a deeper understanding of the evolving religious landscape in the region by unravelling the intricate relationship between the decline of Liberation theology and the rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America within neoliberalism. It sheds light on the complex interplay between socio-political shifts, religious ideologies, and the aspirations of Latin American populations. Ultimately, this article contributes to broader discussions on the impact of religious transformations on society and the challenges faced by traditional religious institutions in a changing world.

To this end, the article will be divided into five (2–6) distinct parts in which it will try to make sense of the assimilation made in point 6 of the rise of neoliberalism and Pentecostalism. Thus, Section 2 will attempt to explain the categories that will be used to make sense of and explain the process of the defeat of Liberation theology (Section 3) and the rise and establishment of neoliberalism (Section 4), which allows for the rise of other confessionalities (both religious and non-religious), which will be studied in Section 5.

2. Secularisation, Social Imaginaries, and Globalisation

Secularisation is a complex phenomenon that involves multiple facets. As some secularist theories claim, it is not the disappearance of religion. On the contrary, it is a process that affects not only society but also religions themselves, which have to reconfigure themselves in light of secularisation (Taylor 2018; Casanova 1994, 2012; Ruiz Andrés 2022b).

Understanding what we mean by secularisation and social imaginaries is crucial. As stated by Zegarra: "some understanding of the debate is crucial if we are to elucidate the development of Liberation theology and Pentecostalism" as they are both "a product of the process of secularization". While both Pentecostalism and Liberation theology are "the results of social, political, and cultural transitions generally understood as emblematic of the process of secularisation, they also challenge certain preconceptions about what that process of secularisation is supposed to look like" (Zegarra 2023b, p. 3).

Consequently, the process of secularisation has changed Latin America's religious landscape from a Catholic Monopoly to a wider religious market (Zegarra 2023b, p. 6), in which both Pentecostalism and Liberation theology appear as two possible religious answers to the secularised world. This transformation in the religious landscape is a result of the secularisation process itself that, in Latin America, appears as a religious outburst, at the expense of Catholicism (Comblin 1993, p. 53). The Latin American religious space is thus presented as a field (Bourdieu and Gutiérrez 2010) in which different competing forces confront each other.

At first glance, this may appear surprising because, according to many secularising perspectives, the process and paradigm of secularisation should entail the abandonment of religion. Rather than this happening, a new plurality and variety has emerged, ushering in a postsecular paradigm and process (Casanova 2017; Beaumont 2019; Beaumont et al. 2020; Hodkinson and Horstkotte 2020; Ruiz Andrés 2022a).

For Taylor, secularisation is a process that involves a shift in the fundamental premises of belief: "Secularisation in this sense is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search take place" (Taylor 2018, p. 3). This implies that secularisation is not about the disappearance of religion from the public sphere but a rash of possibilities in how we can articulate our experience. Secularisation affects the structure of society but does not leave religion untouched. This affects religion (Taylor 2018), which must accommodate a new social realm. Considering this, secularisation is a process that has an impact on all facets of life and experience, including religion.

Thus, secularisation describes a change in the way that experiences are organised in contemporary society, where religion no longer imposes—necessarily—the frame on which this experience is based. What fundamentally changes with secularisation, then, is the social imaginaries that articulate our experience; the "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor 2004, p. 23):

> Social imaginaries (...) refer to trans-subjective patterns of sociocultural meaning, power relations, and their intersecting impact on human action. They are the pre-reflectively lived and shared precondition for our various inter-subjective modes of being-in-the-world. They are anchored and transmitted in symbolic articulations and representations but basically revolve around the collective and creative role of imagination in human discourse and practice (Staudigl 2020, p. 381).

Social imaginaries are the social a priori that constitute the realm of society, the very condition for experience, but they are likewise shaped by that experience. Social imaginaries, in a dialectical move, shape the experience and praxis of society and, likewise, are shaped and constituted by the very same experience and social practice they enable (Taylor 2004; Latré 2018; Ten Kate and Van Den Hemel 2020).

Thus, we can understand social imaginaries as practices (Ten Kate and Van Den Hemel 2020) that create their own conditions of possibility. They constitute and are constituted by the practice of everyday life, or habitus (Bourdieu and Gutiérrez 2010; Bourdieu 2019): social imaginaries articulate—and are articulated by—the everyday experience (Ruiz Andrés 2022b), which is where the socio-ontological structures are displayed, holding the background that enables social life; the very ground on which experience, culture, politics, etc., stands.

In short: it is the historical praxis, articulated through the everyday experience, that constitutes social imaginaries. Meanwhile, social imaginaries simultaneously allow for the articulation of that praxis. It concerns a dialectical relationship in which both poles challenge each other. It is therefore a socio-historical process in which conditions are modified by and through the praxis itself. Social imaginaries do not change day-to-day, but rather these imaginaries are modified until the previous conditions of possibility have mutated, and new ones have emerged to substitute them. It is therefore, like secularisation, a process.

Unlike some other theories, the idea of social imaginaries allows for plurality: "Social imaginaries reflect the so-called 'end of the grand narratives'" (Ten Kate and Van Den Hemel 2020, p. 262). Social imaginaries are plural, and act in diverse fields.

Nevertheless, there are some social imaginaries that are dominant over others, re-emerging as the grand narratives that Ten Kate and Van Den Hemel (2020) thought to be dead. Social imaginaries and grand narratives are not mutually exclusive but can be mutually articulated and legitimised.

This dominance has to do not with the social imaginaries themselves, but with the socio-economic dominance; with the globalisation of Western culture as "globalization relies on the idea that the secular mode of existence has become the only possible way to live in the world" (Ten Kate and Van Den Hemel 2020). As a result, a 'Global imaginary' (Steger 2008) has emerged in which Western social imaginaries are thought to be the only ones capable of securing civilisation; therefore, cultures and nations should move towards the consolidation of these Western social imaginaries.

As has been made clear, social imaginaries are not fixed entities; rather, they are susceptible to change and transformation. The consolidation of a global imaginary ultimately depends on its capacity for dominance and spread within the socio-economic structure and economic power. Capitalism, as a system in which specific social imaginaries are articulated, has ultimately conquered the world in its neoliberal phase (Chodor 2015).

With the implementation of neoliberalism, the social imaginaries associated with the Western capitalist world have been affirmed, and those new ones that are being formed will have to do so around this reality. Economic power, therefore, is of vital importance in

the creation of social imaginaries. As has been said, social imaginaries both shape and are shaped by the social praxis. They are conditioned by the social relations that are established. Furthermore, in a capitalist society, these social relations are marked by the sign of the commodity and capital (Marx 1981; Heinrich 2012; Mau 2023).

This is why, with the arrival of neoliberalism and the disappearance of a reality that could question the logic of this reality, the social imaginaries of the neoliberal era are conditioned by it, whether for or against it. This triumph of capitalism has undergone several processes of questioning its dominance and emerging social imaginaries, which can shake its hegemony. These contenders took advantage of the system's crises (economic, political, and/or cultural) to emerge with strength and challenge capitalist domination.

This was the floor on which Liberation theology emerged: in a world in which there were possible and viable alternatives to capitalism, enabling a subversive and emancipatory social articulation around the imaginary of liberation. However, that world began to disintegrate as soon as it was consolidated and the different contending forces in the social field transformed it through their praxis. The demise of Liberation theology is, therefore, a socio-historical process in which the conditions that made its existence possible begin to disappear through the very action and praxis of the forces in conflict.

As we shall see below, this critique of capitalism appeared to die with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989—two weeks earlier than the assassination of the UCA martyrs—and neoliberalism emerged as capitalism's triumphant period (Chodor 2015, pp. 20–64). Its ideologues and spokespersons thus tried to conjure up the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 2006). Thus, radically immanent social imaginaries are imposed, in which the attempt to go beyond and surpass the existing reality is practically non-existent. With no counterparts to challenge it, neoliberalism spread to all aspects of life, imposing in this way its mute (Mau 2023) and accelerated (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009; Rosa 2013) dominance.

Notwithstanding, as mentioned above, the idea of social imaginaries allows for plurality, even contrary to the reality of economic power. That was the case in the rise of the so-called "pink tide" in Latin America, such as with Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Lula da Silva in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, all of them with different outcomes. This pink tide consisted of different left-wing governments that tried to confront the economic power of capital in its neoliberal version, proposing a welfare state contrary to neoliberal logic (Chodor 2015). Yet, this welfare state did not claim to be outside this neoliberal logic, but rather formed part of it and its social disciplining (Dardot and Laval 2019; Vega Jiménez 2019; Johnson 2020). These governments, although their possible victories against neoliberalism, failed to offer a real alternative outside the logic of capital and its economic power, constituting nothing more than attempts to offer capitalism with a friendly face. It was not, therefore, liberation and emancipation in its deepest sense, but a counter-offensive and resistance against the victory of capital.

3. Dialectics of Defeat

Liberation theology can be understood in several ways: it can be understood as both a social movement and a theology; as a "body of literature, but also as a social movement" (Løland 2023, p. 40). The implications of our decision affect how it is perceived differently.

The first option is to regard Liberation theology as a theological doctrine. This is an academic discourse on God, salvation, and the world. In this sense, Liberation theology is one theology among others, and its presence in today's academic world is unquestionable (Rieger and Silva 2023). There is a vast corpus of theoretical and theological literature on liberation as evidence for this (Althaus-Reid 2003, 2004, 2007, 2010; Sung 2007, 2011b, 2011a, 2018a, 2018b; Tamayo-Acosta 2012, 2017; Da Silva Coelho 2018, 2019, 2021; Petrella 2004; Boff 2006, 2020; Bingemer and Susín 2016; Zegarra 2023a). In this sense, it is not possible to speak about defeat or demise, as Liberation theology has evolved and moved beyond its previous and original discourse theory to incorporate the new subjectivities previously denied by Liberation Theology itself (Althaus-Reid 2007). This apparent demise of liberation theology corresponds to its practical component, as a social movement, when

there has been a shift in the social imaginaries, as well as a change in the socio-economic paradigm, that has led to a crisis of mass participation at the global level (Vásquez 1998; Alma and Vanheeswijck 2018; Traverso 2021; Medina 2022).

Nevertheless, in this article, the choice was made to understand it as a social movement (Martin 1990, p. 290; Smith 1991; Lehmann 1996, pp. 27–28) and so it is necessary to take into account not its theological and philosophical foundations (which undoubtedly shape the praxis), but "to conceive liberation theology as a movement also means to take into account the dynamic nature of this historical phenomenon" (Løland 2023, p. 41). This means that it is subject to social laws and logic that allow its emergence in history. Its behaviour is no different from that of other social movements, and nor should its study be.

Nonetheless, this understanding of liberation theology as a social movement requires an explanation about its theological foundations, as it is the social imaginaries shaped by its discourse that allowed the movement to rise. It is the option for the poor that allows the construction and constitution of a mass social movement of religious character that aims to transform reality in the pursuit of liberation.

What differs in the realm of secularisation compared to a religious social movement is that the public realm is influenced by the private religious sphere. However, as we have seen above, religion does not disappear with secularisation, but rather adopts new ways of relating to the social whole from a differentiated position (Taylor 2018).

Here, the aim was to study the relationship between this defeat and the rise of neoliberalism and the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 2006), in what could be called a 'Neoliberal Age' (Brooks 2004; Johnson 2020) as a new world order (Chodor 2015, pp. 45–64). Nevertheless, both defeat and victory are not definitive phenomena. When speaking about a capitalist victory, we are referring to a historic moment in which capitalism has spread worldwide, and there is no sufficiently organised counter-force against it, meaning it has a free hand to perform its function: the constant revaluation of capital (Marx 1981; Heinrich 2012), as we shall see below. The disappearance of this counter-force means that a limitation can only take place within the limits of the political economy itself, which is incapable of escaping from the capitalist mode of production.

Thus, despite the organisation of social democracy against neoliberalism, as the Latin American pink tide (Chodor 2015) between the end of 1990 and the beginning of 2010 demonstrates, it is not capable of escaping this mode of production, reducing its capacity for governmental action to the limits set by the legality of the capitalist system, being able to build a capitalism with a friendly face, but not overcoming this mode of production.

It is in this context of disappearance that we can locate the defeat of liberation theology, as it lost the organisational strength given by its historical and social context that allowed it to develop in the praxis. Although it has been able to continue to evolve as a theology, we speak of its defeat insofar as it does not have the social and organisational strength of the masses ready for liberation.

The historical defeat of liberation theology is well-documented and demonstrates how religious and political agents of the religious field turned against it in an effort to highlight what they perceived to be a subversive, secularising, and dangerous phenomenon in the area where the Catholic Church had the strongest implementation (Lernoux 1982, 1990; Smith 1991; Trigo 2005; Zegarra 2023b). The proposal here is to understand this demise in socio-ontological terms, in the face of the ontological victory of capital (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Jameson 2007, 2008; Prusik 2022a; Bonefeld and O'Kane 2022), in the loss of the foundation upon which this movement was built.

The demise of liberation theology signalled the end of emancipatory ideas and the anti-capitalist movement, leading to a crisis of social participation in all social movements, and specifically in the Latin American Liberation Church. The major cause of this loss was the dissolution of the historical foundation upon which it was based. This shift in social imaginaries was crucial in the development of Pentecostalism. Similarly, in this ascent, the loss was essential since it deprived Christianity of any viable option to counter this growth.

There is an option to examine this decline in terms of social imaginaries and the development of the socio-political, economic, and religious contexts in which liberation theology was settled. However, this viewpoint is dialectical rather than isolated. This implies that the internal and external conditions are related in the process of defeat.

It is in this term of liberation theology as a social movement that we can speak of a defeat. This does not mean that liberation theology ceased to exist—and the actual literature on liberation proves this is wrong—nor that its influenced has vanished, as the so-called pink tide governments (Chodor 2015) in Latin America in the late 1990s and early 2000s were based on the same premises and claims as liberation theology and every liberation movement of the 1970s and 1980s.

When speaking about defeat and demise, the terms are addressed in the sense that the mass social movement in which liberation theology emerged and lived has entered a profound crisis and it is incapable of involving masses in a large movement, and it has been reduced to some CEBs and relegated spaces (Mariz 1994), although its influence is widespread throughout Latin American Catholicism (CELAM 2007).

Understanding liberation theology as a social movement implies the recognition of its procedural character. As a social and hence political movement, liberation theology is subject to the conditions that make it possible. However, this does not exempt movements from having their own agency. Social movements develop because of interactions between internal and external factors. This is the relationship between insurgent consciousness and the political process (Smith 1991, pp. 55–65; Zegarra 2023b, p. 16). At the time of the emergence of liberation theology:

> The continent was in a state of 'structural sin' and 'institutionalised violence', and the task of the Church was to make an 'option for the poor' and fight against these 'unjust structures'. In other circumstances these statements might have passed unnoticed, or been dismissed as left-wing eccentricities, but perhaps there were particular circumstances which made of them, in some quarters, watchwords of Church renewal and episcopal pronouncements, and in others bones of contention during the following 10 years (Lehmann 1996, p. 50).

It was precisely those "particular circumstances" (i.e., a political opportunity made possible by the actual social imaginaries) that allowed liberation theology to emerge and grow. These are the same "particular circumstances" (i.e., the end of that world and the disappearance of its imaginaries) which led to its demise, but one that does not take place definitively at a specific point but begins to be forged in a process leading from the rise of liberation theology to its defeat.

A social movement emerges in a context where social conditions lead to dissatisfaction "under conditions of ontological insecurity" (Reed 2017, p. 1) that generates a situation of institutional crisis. The very same conditions that build a secure and stabilised field (Bourdieu 2019) begin to crack. Social imaginaries (Taylor 2004), on which an apparent solid ground had been built, falter. Thus, the social order breaks down. Political opportunities (Smith 1991, p. 58) emerge and, for the movement to stabilize, it must be institutionalised. That is, it must constitute a theory that feeds it, as well as an internal organisation that generates general tactics and strategy (Smith 1991, pp. 51–68). In short: political opportunity is not enough; it must be made effective.

It is possible to see this demise by selecting this insight. This failure can be attributed to several factors which are historical and socio-ontological, immanently interrelated, and linked. The process of one involves the other and vice versa. Liberation theology has experienced a dialectical defeat process. Defeat occurs at the point at which the process cannot generate more of itself, stagnates, and fails to overcome the changing conditions it seeks to subvert. The political opportunity that allowed its emergence disappeared along with the social imaginaries upon which it was constructed.

Smith (1991) adopted the Political Process Model (McAdam 1997) to explain the emergence of liberation theology. This model explains how this phenomenon occurs in the foreground of reality, but it is unable to reach the ontological foundation of society, where

social imaginaries shape experience itself. With the Political Process Model, we are able to explain how it emerges, but it can say nothing about why it emerged or about the structural conditions that made it possible.

Lacking the web of categories that allowed for it, political opportunities would not have been possible, nor the participation of the masses (Vásquez 1998). For a political opportunity to arise, it must be provided in advance in social imaginaries. The emergence of liberation theology has a further basis in the social constitution of a world marked by two antagonistic blocks in a struggle, where the existence of capitalism was not definitively given. Utopia was a real possibility, not a theoretical daydream. This implied, above all, a broad participation that turned the movement into a mass movement. Dreaming of emancipation was possible not only because of the social imaginaries, but also because of the mass social participation that it entailed (spurred on by those same social imaginaries).

As Zegarra states, liberation theology's demise started in the democratisation process, when "the change in political and economic conditions made the radicalisation of previous decades less appealing or fruitful" (Zegarra 2023b, p. 17). Previous authoritarian regimes came to an end with this democratisation process, which firmly established capitalism as a kind of liberal democracy:

> With Brazil's political opening of the 1980s (the so-called *Abertura*), some people left CEBs and joined new social movements and political parties that had emerged. On the international level, the Catholic church had become more conservative and was no longer supportive of the progressive sector (Mariz 1994, p. 18).

With democratisation, liberation theology began to adopt new ways of struggle, which led them to align themselves with more reformist rather than subversive positions. These positions focused more on improving living conditions within the rules of law and social states: "the means to pursue social justice have changed and the focus of liberationists has shifted" (Zegarra 2023b, p. 17). This change implied a growing acceptance of the framework of liberal bourgeois parliamentarians, leaving aside the revolutionary subversiveness of the early days. Liberation theology is, then, being pushed into a process in which revolutionary ideals are gradually disappearing, even though economic and social injustice continues to exist under neoliberalism.

> In 1989, the collapse of real socialism and Marxism, on which the Catholic religious reformist alternative was based, led to a considerable weakening of these movements within the Catholic Church. On the other hand, while some bishops defended human rights against the military regimes, most strongly supported the new order imposed by force of arms. Ultimately, the Church was institutionally strengthened in a struggle against centrifugal forces that threatened its corporate integrity. This occurred in the context of "Romanisation", i.e., increasing submission to the decisions of the Vatican, and within the trend of strengthening church-state relations (Bastian 1994, p. 227).

Liberation theology, which was based on the articulation of collective social action around the CEBs (Mariz 1994, pp. 42–50), no longer has a place in an increasingly accelerated and isolated world (Rosa 2013; Rosa and Scheuerman 2009) in which there is no more room for social action, as we shall see below, and this leads to an internal crisis in participation and activism (Vásquez 1998, pp. 57–73).

The demise of liberation theology, then, has its roots in the same conditions that make it possible. It is, therefore, a defeat with internal and external causes (Vásquez 1998, pp. 57–98): the disappearance of the social imaginaries that made social participation in a revolutionary programme possible along with the external actions against liberation theology and the rise of Pentecostalism and other religious options, which undermined the social framework on which its population was based.

Thus, this situation of apparent defeat conditions a lack of influence and capacity to provide adequate alternatives to reality. The apparent defeat is such because it does not allow for the continuity of the movement in the present, so that the Catholic Church loses

its organisational capacity against the current reality and causes a situation of bleeding in the face of those denominations that are able to offer a response, while the Church of the poor is unable to remain attractive.

In summary: the potential of the organisation today is conditioned by the historical and ontological defeat. Assassination attempts of the movement (Smith 1991) and the absence of the background on which it was founded have resulted in liberation theology being unable to rely on the influence and significance it once had, making it incapable of countering the advance of Pentecostalism and/or religious non-affiliation. However, its theological–theoretical force has remained, influencing the different social movements that have emerged since the 1990s, as well as the Catholic Church itself and its social doctrine, especially with the pontificate of Francis, who seems to be rehabilitating liberation theology in the Catholic Church, although this is still an open debate (Da Silva Coelho 2019, 2021; Faggioli 2020; Borghesi 2021; Løland 2021, 2023).

This demise or defeat must, then, be understood within its dialectical process. Understanding this apparent defeat or demise as a dialectical category, arising from the interplay between the persistence of certain ideas and their ongoing impact, and the decline or disappearance of the corresponding social movement. This nuanced interplay responds to the evolving dynamics of contemporary social mobilisation (Gouzoulis 2023; Lapegna et al. 2023), as well as the changing dynamics within the context of Catholicism and its 'bleeding' in members (Pew Research Center 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018).

4. The Neoliberal Age

When speaking of the Neoliberal Age, it will be understood as an Age characterised by neoliberalism. The Neoliberal Age is marked by a new social ontology of the world in which the alternative to capitalism has disappeared and capitalism has conquered all parts of the world, both geographically and socially. The Neoliberal Age is marked by the final victory of capitalism, establishing a new world order (Chodor 2015, p. 45) in which nothing is left outside capitalist totality.

Neoliberalism must be understood not just as an economic doctrine (Assies et al. 2016, p. 54), but as a "rationality that produces a specific kind of human subjectivity" (Aguirre 2021, p. 1) "that has tied seemingly disconnected individuals to the interconnected rule of markets"(Prusik 2022a, p. 9). With neoliberalism a "second nature" (Adorno 2007) rationality takes over where every social relation under neoliberalism is, thus, mediated by the market, dominated by totality. (Prusik 2022a, pp. 119–40; 2022b).

Neoliberalism is understood, then, not by its policies, but by its transcendental dimension (Brown 2017; Dardot and Laval 2017) as "the rationality that creates and justifies both the conditions of possibility of such policies and the conditions of possibility of a new human experience" (Aguirre 2021, p. 2). Neoliberalism is, therefore, the new social ontology in which everyone and everything is interconnected. It is a new social imaginary (Taylor 2004) that shapes reality and totality:

> 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 (Dardot and Laval 2017, p. 8).

Neoliberalism not so much about specific policies as it is about a liquid rationality which constitutes "the creative force of a new kind of human experience" (Aguirre 2021, p. 2). Neoliberalism is, hence, understood as a normative transcendentality. It constitutes reality and subjectivity, along with the material social relations, shaping the very conditions of experience. It works, then, as a social disciplining (Vega Jiménez 2019), reifying, and reducing reality to adapt to the exchange value: "neoliberalism induces individuals to manage every aspect of life according to an entrepreneurial metric of investment, self-discipline, and competition" (Prusik 2022a, p. 9).

What is, therefore, neoliberalism? What is this new social logic and rationality that is being imposed? The above brings us closer to Foucault's biopolitical (Foucault 2008) definition of neoliberalism as an "entrepreneur society in which every environmental incentive—institutions, laws, credit, knowledge and so on—is geared to normalize economic competition" (Van Wijk 2022). Neoliberalism is thus a social disciplining (Vega Jiménez 2019) that imposes hyper-productivity on its subjects. There are market logics in all spheres of life and society, constituting the subject as an enterprise. This imposes a regime of permanent (self-)vigilance to be productive all the time:

> The problem of neoliberalism is rather how the overall exercise of political power can be modeled on the principles of a market economy. So it is not a question of freeing an empty space, but of taking the formal principles of a market economy and referring and relating them to, of projecting them on to a general art of government. (...). Neoliberalism should not therefore be identified with laissez-faire, but rather with permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention (Foucault 2008, pp. 131–32).

Having taken shape around the 1960s around Hayek and the Chicago Boys and spread through authoritarian regimes and democratic setbacks (Johnson 2020; Boas and Gans-Morse 2009, pp. 145–52), neoliberalism established itself universally with the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989)—occurring simultaneously with the assassination of the Jesuits at UCA—and USSR's collapse (1991), as these facts established the turning point of an era (Traverso 2021, p. 2).

Everything that had shaped the previous world was broken into pieces in this drastically new one. The fall of the Berlin Wall was not just an important event for Germany. It marked the demise of the bipolar world and thus of the socialist alternative.

Along with the wall, not only did the USSR collapse, but a historical cycle—which may be referred to as the October Cycle since it began with the victory of the October Revolution—ended. Even though socialist ideologies were far distant from the Soviet doctrine and Stalinism that had begun to flourish around the world, the fall of the USSR marked the end of the historical cycle that allowed for the emergence of these forms of socialism and left-wing ideologies:

> Besides the official, already discredited "monumental history" of communism, there was a different historical narrative, created by the October Revolution (...). After the shock of November 1989, however, this narrative vanished, buried under the debris of the Berlin Wall. The dialectic of the twentieth century was broken. Instead of liberating new revolutionary energies, the downfall of State Socialism seemed to have exhausted the historical trajectory of socialism itself (Traverso 2021, p. 2).

The very condition of the possibility of revolution and the social imaginaries of utopia, hope, and emancipation disappeared. Thus, the twentieth-first century was born as a time shaped by a general "eclipse of utopias" (Traverso 2021, p. 5). The 'end of history' (Fukuyama 2006) was, then, proclaimed, and the neoliberal era inaugurated, which managed to spread across the globe, with no authority capable of confronting it. In the Neoliberal Age, we can witness the end of 'the political' (Mouffe 2020), not politics as the administration of economic and social policies, but of the political realm in the sense of emancipation and utopia.

The Neoliberal Age is, thus, characterised by a de facto acceptance of the status quo, since economic policies and institutions—as the free market—are given as de iure (Sung 2007; Hinkelammert 2018; Da Silva Coelho 2019). The establishment of *welfarism* (Dardot and Laval 2017; Vega Jiménez 2019) helped to create this conception of a neoliberal society.

> Neoliberalism is deeply rooted in our culture because it is a successful attempt to announce and effectuate the end of politics: not the end of political systems, of policy and strategy—neoliberalism itself is a political system—but the end of the

political dimension of human life on an existential and social level (Ten Kate and Van Den Hemel 2020).

According to its transcendental dimension, neoliberalism depicts the current situation as natural and as the natural order of things. Whoever questions it is a radical who pretends to destroy society, and politics is left to politicians (Mouffe 2019, 2020), who accept, across the political spectrum of parliamentarianism, the market model (Ten Kate and Van Den Hemel 2020, p. 269). The communist bloc's failure serves as evidence that there is nothing else than the current reality, i.e., current capitalism. There is nothing beyond capitalism, hence the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 2006).

In this way, new social imaginaries are gradually implanted that constitute and help to delimit the borders of neoliberalism, helping the self-reproduction of this new phase of capitalism. What is meant by this is that neoliberalism is not a social imaginary, but a phase of capital and a new way of exercising its economic power. For this, it necessitates the formation of new social imaginaries that shape social and cultural reality. The economic power of capital and the social imaginaries that mould its reality through the social praxis would thus be two levels of reality that are intimately intertwined in a dialectical relationship.

The revolutionary left has apparently disappeared, scattering itself into different emancipatory movements which, despite their mobilising force, are not capable of articulating a political struggle in a praxis that aims to overcome the given reality. However, they do question this reality and challenge it from the perspective of the subjectivities denied by the classic emancipatory struggles. This is the emergence of different plural emancipatory movements: feminism, the LGTBIQ+ struggle, environmentalism, decolonisation, the native peoples' movement, etc. Liberation theology has influenced liberation movements on many occasions, as well as being influenced by them and its subjects (Althaus-Reid 2003, 2007, 2010; Boff 2006; Da Silva Coelho 2018).

These movements currently enjoy a broad mobilising capacity that challenges the foundations of the Neoliberal Age but seem to be reduced to state influence and the deepening of liberal democracies in the emergence of the pink tide (Chodor 2015), which tried to defend the countries involved against the offensives of capital through means of a welfare state that mitigated the effects of neoliberalism. However, such discourses against neoliberalism constitute a questioning of reality that could well reopen a liberationist cycle and transform social imaginaries and, thus, reality. The task here is to try to make theory a force that is capable of guiding and organising an emancipatory praxis (Adorno 2008; Recio Huetos 2023).

The Mute Compulsion of Social Acceleration

The literature on neoliberalism (Boas and Gans-Morse 2009; Brown 2017; Dardot and Laval 2017; Villacañas 2020; Mouffe 2020) makes, nonetheless, a fundamental mistake in that it understands neoliberalism as excess. Neoliberalism is a consequence of the immanent laws of capital.

It is, therefore, not a question of reducing its pernicious effects, since it is the very structure of capitalist society that generates inequality. It is not a question of excess, but of a form of society that is maintained through its contradictions. It is the very same constitution that generates antagonism and inequality. There would be no capitalism with a friendly face as "society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it" (Adorno 2007, p. 320); everything under neoliberalism still subjected to the law of value (Marx 1981; Adorno 2006), now radicalised and expanded over every boundary that ever existed.

Neoliberalism is, thus, a deepening of the social ontology of capitalism. It is not a new form of political economy, but a radicalisation, expansion, and universalisation of the immanent laws of capital, of the commodity fetishism (Marx 1981). The Neoliberal Age and neoliberalism are the final victory of capitalism, but not a distortion of it.

This is not to say that neoliberalism brings nothing new, but to criticise the way in which this rationality is usually attacked from a supposedly Marxian position. The

critique of neoliberalism must be the critique of capitalism unless it is made from the liberal Keynesian paradigm. Neoliberalism may be a more violent form of capitalism, but all forms of capital will be under the form–value category, which implies systematic inequality (Marx 1981; Mau 2023; Ramas San Miguel 2018; Martínez Marzoa 2018; Heinrich 2012; Bonefeld and O'Kane 2022).

However, there are several characteristics that distinguish neoliberalism from previous stages of capitalism. This is not the place here to discuss and analyse the economic-political characteristics that characterise the specificity of neoliberalism (Gray 2009; Durand 2017). The point, however, is to indicate what, in my view, is one of the main characteristics at the societal level: social acceleration which defines Neoliberal Age as a high-speed society (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009; Rosa 2009, 2013). This social acceleration in Rosa's work, however, is not new in capitalism, but a radicalisation of the economic power of capital (Marx 1981; Heinrich 2012; Mau 2023).

Neoliberalism strengthens capitalist rules and logic, shaping subjectivity and experience together with neoliberal social imaginaries, culminating in social acceleration. Due to the economic power of capital, social acceleration is a hallmark of neoliberalism. However, the concept of "social acceleration", as explored and expanded by Rosa (2009, 2013, 2016; Rosa and Scheuerman 2009), has its roots in the critique of political economy[1] (Marx 1981), as part of the mute compulsion which imprints the necessity of the self-reproduction of capitalism for all subjects (Heinrich 2012; Mau 2023)

Rosa uses the term "social acceleration" to describe the specific temporality of late capitalism, which has its origins in modern temporality. Similar to how the logic of capitalism works (Marx 1981), this temporality operates independently of the decisions and actions of individuals. It is a temporal framework that imposes an accelerated and authoritarian rhythm of labour, which persists outside the boundaries of labour but imposes itself in all aspects of modern life. Nothing but alienation and isolation emerges as a result (Rosa 2016). Accordingly, Rosa defines modern society as an accelerated society (Rosa 2016, p. 39), which also implies a reduction of time (Rosa 2013, p. xxxv).

The main implication of this acceleration is a new form of authoritarianism and totalitarianism characteristic of the neoliberal project, as a result of "the reduction, or even eradication, of political control or steering through deregulation, privatisation and judicialization" (Rosa 2016, p. 124) in favour of the total and absolute market control over society. De-democratising policies are, thus, a natural part of the neoliberal regime (Vega Jiménez 2019, p. 540).

Those subjected to neoliberal power[2] have an increasingly accelerated time to produce more—in most cases, under the threat of debt as well (Gouzoulis 2023). Hence, individuals experience that time is reduced, having less time available, which implies a reduction in possibilities for action and organisation outside of work. Under neoliberalism, there is a reduction in the organisational capacities of workers, which ultimately translates into a pauperisation of their conditions (Castillo Fernández 2011; Jacobs and Myers 2014; Engels and Roy 2023).

Subjects are, then, trapped in a permanent high-speed pace, unable to stop. This acceleration would result in "blurring the distinction between work and life" (Johnsen and Sørensen 2015, p. 335). Production crosses all barriers and does not remain in the factory, but is also imposed on leisure and culture (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007; Horkheimer 2013). The individual is, therefore, alienated and isolated, hence entailing the loss of democratic rights (Sung 2018b).

The neoliberal society would be characterised by an absolute liberation of the market, which would result not in the freedom of individuals—despite its appearance—but in their domination by the accelerated logic of capital: "while individuals experience themselves as completely free, they also feel completely dominated by an excessive and constantly growing list of social demands" (Rosa 2016, p. 129). As is the case in capitalist accumulation, the subjects must be constantly revaluing themselves, increasing in value, behaving like a commodity. This has crucial implications for the neoliberal subjects as their freedom "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 regulation" (Aguirre 2021, p. 3). They do not develop social relations freely, but are traversed by the commodity form and its fetishism, together with the reification that accompanies them (Marx 1981; Dussel 2017; Ramas San Miguel 2018).

The individual falls prey to the productive pace and is forced to reproduce this same acceleration that traps him in all aspects of his life through its social praxis. It is, therefore, an abstract social disciplining, which imprints on individuals the necessity they must fulfil to ensure their survival. Human dignity is, thus, reduced to its adaptation to totality (Horkheimer and Adorno 2007); to its productive capacity.

In this way, through this mute compulsion that participates in and feeds social acceleration, social imaginaries are configured, whose aim is none other than to confront reality and its constant self-reproduction through discipline, as in the case of Pentecostalism (Mariz 1994; Lehmann 1996; Aguirre 2021).

This does not mean, however, that criticism is impossible. With neoliberalism, new social imaginaries are also emerging that question it (including the pink tide, as well as the various and very diverse social movements). In the accelerated social praxis itself social imaginaries can also be shaped, such as the abolition (*Aufhebung*) and emancipation of reality. The very condition of capitalism offers moments for its radical critique. It is capital itself which, in addition to creating the conditions for its reproduction, also provides for the possibility of its abolition (Marx 1981; Adorno 2007; Heinrich 2012; Maiso 2022).

5. Religious Switching in Latin America

The crucial aspect of secularisation—as has been stated—is not the renunciation of religion, which frequently does not occur, but rather the paradigm shifts in which social imaginaries broaden and new opportunities emerge. This opens up a world of possibilities about consciousness and belief that opens up the religious field to a wide market of competition among religions and non-religious world views (Hutchings et al. 2021) that results in high diversity, with several religious actors competing in the same field (Bastian 2017).

After the process of secularisation, modern societies have been considered to be, above all, plural (Habermas 2008; Ruiz Andrés 2022a). It is in this sense that Zegarra (2023b, p. 3), as mentioned above, points out that both Pentecostalism and liberation theology are the product and result of secularisation. They are both "appealing or responding to the same needs, desires, frustrations and alienations of the mass of poor people whose adherence they seek" (Lehmann 1996, p. 6).

The Latin American religious field (Bourdieu and Gutiérrez 2010) has transformed rapidly and drastically in recent times, as different forces have emerged to threaten Catholic hegemony both within and outside Christianity (Delgado-Molina 2021). It is the sociological certification that religion does not necessarily disappear with secularisation (Casanova 1994). Instead, there has been a religious outburst at the expense of the Catholic Church (Comblin 1993, p. 53). In this regard, Pentecostalism has emerged particularly strongly in Latin America's religious landscape since the 1980s.

This marked advance of Protestantism, above all in its Pentecostal base, however, is not exclusive to Latin America, but rather "is part of a world-wide phenomenon" (Martin 1990, p. 49). Pentecostalism has spread across the Western world and the Global South with unprecedented speed even "in countries where Christianity is otherwise declining or static (. . .), the dynamic sector is evangelical, and in particular Pentecostal" (Martin 1990, p. 49). Yet, "the optimum chances for Protestantism exist where the church has been drastically weakened and yet the culture has remained pervasively religious" (Martin 1990, p. 59), as is the case in Latin America.

5.1. Latin American Religious Shift

Since the time of Spanish colonial control, Latin America has been regarded as a Catholic region. Indeed, it continues to be so today. It is thought to have the largest number of Catholics on the planet, and the largest Catholic population resides in Brazil (Pew Research Center 2013, 2014). Although this is the case, it is also the region (and country in the case of Brazil) where Pentecostal evangelicalism is expanding fastest (Pew Research Center 2013, 2014).

As stated by Zegarra: "Protestantism really flourished in Latin America when the basic structures of democratic living—even if they were weak, and always under threat from military coups—had already become part of the lived experience of most people in the region" (Zegarra 2023b, p. 7). Latin America's colonial heritage imprinted an authoritarian reality in which the Catholic Church and the colonial state partnered to shape society (Dussel 1974; Bastian 1994, 1997). After independence, the Church and the modern institutions such as the Creole republics came into direct confrontation with each other (Bastian 1997).

In this scenario, Protestantism in Latin America was labelled as "liberal Protestantism" as it was "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" (Aguirre 2021), and it sought the freedom and reformations that only parliamentary democracies could grant (Bastian 1994). Thus, as was the case with the Mexican Revolution, traditional Protestantism took part in liberal uprisings that aimed for openness in Latin America (Bastian 1994, 1997).

Nonetheless, while left-wing revolutions and social movements were emerging on the continent in a context of national security dictatorships (Pion-Berlin 1988), the emergence of Pentecostalism in the second half of the 20th century brought about a turnaround in this situation:

> By the early 1960s, the composition of Protestantism was changing. Protestant churches born out of liberal associative movements and "transplant churches" were becoming a congruent part of the religious field and were dividing into rival theological tendencies, liberal and fundamentalist. To be sure, they had always been in the minority against a hegemonic Catholic Church, but for the first time they were facing active competition from Pentecostal churches and all kinds of "faith missions" on their own turf (Bastian 1994, p. 232).

At that time, not just the Latin American, but the world religious field, was at a turning point. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) shocked the Catholic Church and prepared it for the secular world in which it was already immersed (Clifford and Faggioli 2022). The slogan of interpreting the sign of the times (Second Vatican Council 1965) suddenly modernised a Catholic Church that seemed to be stuck in its own tradition (Castillo 2010; Clifford and Faggioli 2022; García Martín 2023). For the Church in Latin America this was translated into pastoral work and CELAM, with the Medellín Conference, which sanctioned and legitimised liberation theology (Dussel 1979; Smith 1991; Tamayo-Acosta 2011).

However, it was not just due to the Council, as the Cold War also played a part in this revolutionary reform of the Latin American church (Stoll 1990, pp. 24–42). The second half of the 20th Century was, for Latin America, a time of transformation and social struggle. The Cuban Revolution (1959) laid the foundation stone for an era in which the Latin American continent began to dream of its own liberation (Smith 1991; Bastian 1997, p. 46). The 20th Century in Latin America was politically characterised by authoritarianism (Rieger and Silva 2023). An authoritarianism that, at first, had been supported by the national churches against the advance of "atheistic communism" as in Brazil (Vásquez 1998). In this scenario, and in the context of the Cold War that divided the world into two irreconcilable blocs, the Latin American Left saw in the Cuban revolution the possibility of building its own policy from Latin America and for Latin America (Smith 1991; Bastian 1997, p. 46).

A social imaginary was consolidated that made it possible to think of a reality beyond capitalism and the church was also affected by it. Faced with this reality, and under the

premise of adequately interpreting the sign of the times, the Latin American Church gathered in Medellín, promulgated the preferential option for the poor and, with it, liberation theology, as the theology proper to the Church in Latin America (Smith 1991; Rieger and Silva 2023).

As a counterpart, the conservatives in the Church tried to organise the counter-reform (Stoll 1990, pp. 24–42), as well as the conservative reactionaries of the states who organised themselves in various ways to confront liberation theology. From Rome to Washington, different strategies were implemented with the aim of undermining the influence of a form of Catholicism that threatened the capitalist status quo (Dussel 1979; Lernoux 1982, 1990; Smith 1991). These strategies ranged from condemnations of liberation theology from the Vatican to the assassination of its figures by professional armies.

It is in this scenario of the growth of liberation theology and the different forces that were revolting against it that Pentecostalism began to emerge strongly in Latin America as a counterpart of liberation theology and as a clear opponent, trying to give a different answer to the same problems (Lehmann 1996, p. 6), as they are both different strategies for coping with poverty (Mariz 1994).

This unprecedented rise of Pentecostalism changed not only the religious landscape of Latin America, but also infused a radical shift in the political alignment of Latin American Protestantism from a liberal position to a fundamentalist one, associating itself with authoritarian politics and regimes, such as the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro[3] (Løland 2020):

> Latin American Protestantism and Pentecostalism are no longer bearers of a democratic religious and political culture, but on the contrary, have assimilated the authoritarian religious and political culture, and operate within the logic of corporate bargaining (Bastian 1994, p. 297).

Then, by the 1980s and 1990s, with the demise of liberation theology, and the implementation and development of neoliberalism in Latin America (Aguirre 2021), Pentecostalism now had a free hand to increase its influence. Pentecostals started to grow in number "in many of the areas that had previously been served by the clergy and pastoral agents associated with liberation theology" (Zegarra 2023b, p. 16). The reasons for this growth are diverse and vary from "pauperization and inequality as well as Latin American prosperity, diversification, and economic openness" (Aguirre 2021), i.e., the new forms of socio-economic domination and the associated social imaginaries, as shall be seen below. Those reasons are responsible for the reduction in the influence and scope of Latin American Catholicism in favour of Pentecostalism, due to the different adaptation of both phenomena to the prevailing socio-economic reality (Aguirre 2021).

The socio-religious landscape of Latin America thus started to change abruptly, and has experienced a religious rebirth in the form of new Christian denominations (Hartch 2014) and non-religious realities. This bleeding is therefore multifaceted, since it represents a loss of members in different directions (to other forms of Christianity, other religions, and even non-affiliation).

To recapitulate: The religious and political landscapes of Latin America have undergone significant transformations since the 1970s, including the demise of liberation theology and, associated with it, a bleeding of Catholicism in the socio-religious realm, as well as the implementation of neoliberalism as the predominant economic and political system. The rise and emergence of Pentecostalism is another of these transformations in the Latin American religious landscape, the cause of which coincides with the retreat of Catholicism (Bastian 1997).

With the loss and disappearance of liberation theology, Catholicism lost the possibility to face the challenges posed by the new neoliberal and postsecular world into which it entered. Facing the new problems of the Neoliberal Age, it lost its unique and original potential to organise a pastoral praxis for coping with poverty (Mariz 1994) from a critical perspective.

Hence, faced with the advance of neoliberalism and unable to cope with it, a new form of popular religiosity emerged with force, which tried to respond to the same needs through whose faith the economic prosperity and wealth of the Kingdom can be achieved

(Mariz 1994; Lehmann 1996; Cox 2001; Aguirre 2021). However, it is equally powerless to halt the spread of non-religious viewpoints that are infiltrating an expanding religious market. Non-religiosity is also a way of coping with the new neoliberal mentality of profit and productivity, freed from all moral and social constraints.

5.2. Latin America's Socio-Religious Reality

Before attempting to understand if there exists any kind of relationship between the apparent demise of liberation theology and the rise of Pentecostalism, we must look at the socio-religious situation in Latin America in the light of sociological studies and reports (Pew Research Center 2014; Latinbarometro 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020) to see how this picture has changed in recent decades, since the demise of liberation theology and the rise of Pentecostalism.

The religious transition has been fast and extensive in the socio-religious realm. According to Latinbarómetro's report in 1995, Catholics represented 80.3% of the population in Latin America, while Protestants represented just 6%. By 2020, the total number of Catholics had fallen to 60.4% while Protestantism had reached 12.8% for those same countries surveyed in 1995 (Table 1). This rose to 57.10% Catholics and 21.10% Protestants for all countries surveyed in the 2020 report (Table 2). Thus, if we take a closer look at reality, we can see that Catholicism has continued to decline in Latin America (Figure 1).

Table 1. Latinbarómetro % of religion by country (1995–2020 Comparison) [a].

Country	Catholics 1995	Catholics 2020	Protestants 1995	Protestants 2020
Argentina	87.2%	48.9%	3.4%	6.6%
Brazil	78.3%	54.7%	8.6%	25.6%
Chile	73.7%	52.6%	9.5%	8.9%
Mexico	78%	74.1%	7.7%	5.2%
Paraguay	93.5%	85%	3.1%	7.1%
Peru	90.5%	70.2%	4%	17.7%
Uruguay	60.7%	33.7%	5.6%	8.8%
Venezuela	88.5%	64.1%	4.4%	22.1%
TOTAL	80.3%	60.4%	6%	12.8%

[a] % of religion by country (1995–2020 Comparison). Source (Latinbarometro 1995, 2020).

Table 2. Latinbarómetro % of religion by country (2020) [b].

Country	Catholics	Protestants
Argentina	48.9%	6.6%
Bolivia	65.8%	19.1%
Brazil	54.7%	25.6%
Chile	52.6%	8.9%
Colombia	70.1%	16.9%
Costa Rica	55.2%	26.3%
Dominican Republic	53%	21.9%
Ecuador	69.5%	15.7%
El Salvador	39.2%	37.7%
Guatemala	41.4%	42.3%
Honduras	38.2%	43%
Mexico	74.1%	5.2%
Nicaragua	45%	38.3%
Panama	52.5%	27.1%
Paraguay	85%	7.1%
Peru	70.2%	17.7%
Uruguay	33.7%	8.8%
Venezuela	64.1%	22.1%
TOTAL	57.1%	21.1%

[b] % of religion by country (2020). Source (Latinbarometro 2020).

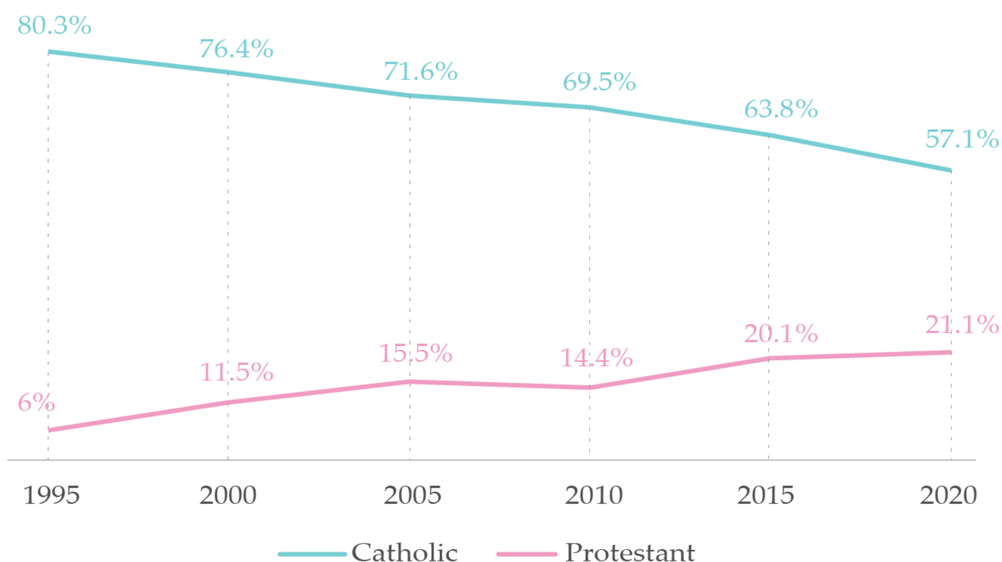

Figure 1. Decline of Catholicism and rise of Protestantism in Latin America. Self-made. Source (Latinbarometro 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, 2020).

According to Aguirre (2021), "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". Thus, if we look at the Pew Research survey in Latin America (Pew Research Center 2014), we can agree with this judgment: "in every country across Latin America, roughly half or more of Protestants either say they belong to a church that is part of a Pentecostal denomination or personally identify as a Pentecostal Christian" (Pew Research Center 2014, p. 62). Of the 22.2% of Protestants in Latin America, according to this survey only 18.6% belong to a historical Protestant church, while 52.1% belong to a Pentecostal church (Figure 2).

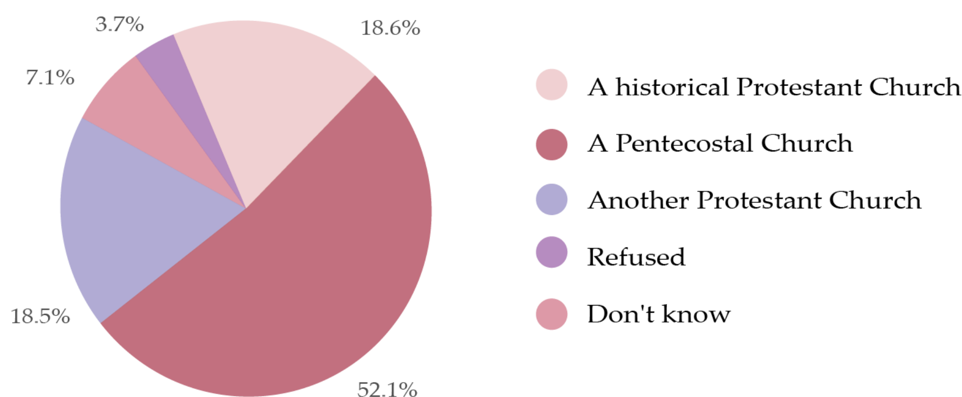

Figure 2. Pentecostals in Protestantism (%). Self-made. Source: (Pew Research Center 2014).

One of the main causes of this shift from Catholicism to Pentecostalism is the phenomenon of conversion from traditional to new forms of confession (Pew Research Center 2013, 2014; Ramírez Calzadilla 2008, p. 95). According to Pew Research Center (2014), 44.5% of today's Protestants—whose majority, as observed, belongs to a Pentecostal church—were raised Catholic, while only 1.2% of today's Catholics were raised Protestant (Table 3). In other words, only 5.8% of those who were raised Protestant are now Catholics, while 12.4% of those who were raised Catholic are now Protestant (Table 4). Due to these circumstances and other options available in the religious market, Latin America has a very diverse socio-religious landscape marked by converts and believers moving between different

religions in which the most common conversion is to Protestantism, causing a bleeding in Latin American Catholicism (Figure 3).

Table 3. Pew Research. Current and raised religion [c].

Thinking about when you were a child, in what religion were you raised?			
What is your present religion?		Catholic	Protestant
	Catholic	98.1%	1.2%
	Protestant	44.5%	49.2%

[c] Current and Raised Religion in Latin America. Source (Pew Research Center 2014).

Table 4. Pew Research. Raised and current religion [d].

What is your present religion?			
Thinking about when you were a child, in what religion were you raised?		Catholic	Protestant
	Catholic	80%	12.4%
	Protestant	5.8%	82.9%

[d] Raised and current religion in Latin America. Source (Pew Research Center 2014).

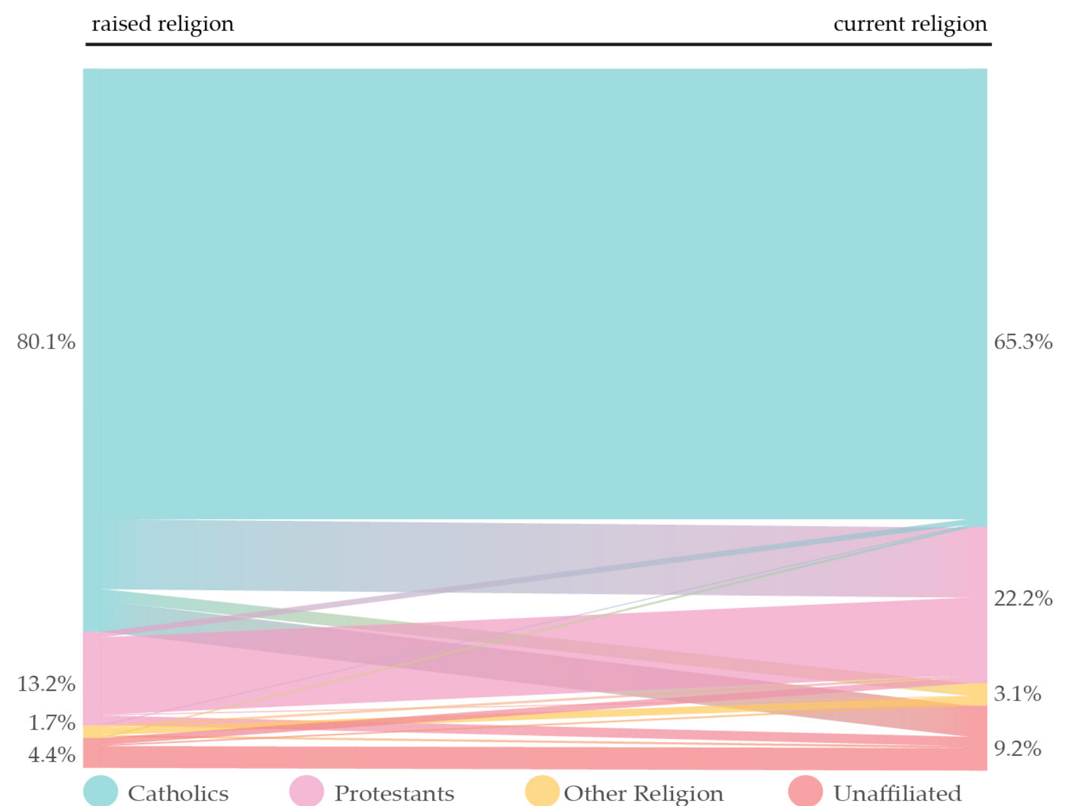

Figure 3. Percentage of converts: dynamics and evolution of religious beliefs and affiliations from the religion in which an individual was raised to the religion they currently identify with. Source: (Pew Research Center 2014). Self-made. Regarding the number of Protestants, it is important to keep in mind the plural configuration of these, albeit with a large Pentecostal majority, as shown in Figure 2. Likewise, the majority of conversions to non-affiliation (atheism, agnosticism, etc.) come from Catholicism (Pew Research Center 2014).

We are witnessing a religious explosion that implies an abandonment of the Catholic Church (Comblin 1993, p. 53)—which is still the main religion of Latin Americans although this is no longer the case in some countries (Table 2)—without needing to abandon religion completely, as the proportion of unaffiliated people (atheistic, agnostic, etc.) remains

at around 10% (Pew Research Center 2014), far from the almost 30% in the U.S.A. (Pew Research Center 2021) or 24% in Western Europe (Pew Research Center 2018). This situation builds the Latin American society not as a Catholic or Protestant society but rather as a plural society, which is characteristic of postsecular societies (Habermas 2008; Beaumont 2019; Beaumont et al. 2020; Ruiz Andrés 2022a). It is in this postsecular context that the Pentecostal phenomenon has acquired unusual importance. Latin America has not moved away from religion; rather, its (post)secular process has concluded in a religious explosion and an increase in pluralities.

Nevertheless, as can be seen in Table 1, the bleeding of Catholicism is not always counterbalanced by a similar rise in Protestantism. Countries such as Uruguay, Argentina, and Paraguay have experienced an increase in their Protestant population, but the increase is not as marked as in the other countries. Indeed, in Chile it can be observed that not only has it not increased significantly, but it has even decreased. In these countries, we would be approaching a more classical secularising process in which there has been a separation and distancing from religion.

This shows that the rise of Protestantism is also due to other important factors and crises within the Catholic Church that are occurring in diverse and pluralistic ways across the continent, and which also entails an increase in non-affiliation—those people coming primarily from Catholicism (Figure 3).

Crises such as the sexual abuse crisis have led to a loss of legitimacy of the Catholic Church, causing a distancing from it in different ways: conversion to another Christian denomination (as can be observed in Central America), or the abandonment of the religion (as in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay). The actions of the Catholic Church with the sexual abuse crisis, as well as its response and the way it has acted to deal with this issue, have led to a detachment and distancing of broad sectors of society from the Church, often leading to its abandonment (Carvacho Traverso 2020; Díaz Lize 2021; Armbruster 2022), whether that be towards secular positions or other denominations.

This also implies that perhaps it is not only Pentecostalism that is the visible face of this neoliberal turn of the religious, but that non-religiosity is also part of this development by disarticulating and dissolving the social relations that allow for an identification with the religious (Eagleton 2003). In the same way that the decline of Catholicism implies not only an increase in Pentecostalism, but also in non-religiosity, we can say that the rise of neoliberalism has not only implied this Pentecostal advance, but also that of non-religiosity in opposition to religion (Eagleton 2003; Latour 2019; Ruiz Andrés 2022a; Cotter 2022).

Thus, to grasp the phenomenon of Pentecostalism's evolution and proliferation, as well as to understand and consider the factors discussed in this article (social imaginaries, socio-economic situation, etc.), one must take into consideration the postsecular paradigm. It is a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single explanation; thus, studies on Latin American religiosity must be approached from a plurality of perspectives and interdisciplinary approaches that consider the different relations and processes that have occurred within the Latin American religious landscape.

Likewise, focusing on the question of the abandonment of liberationist positions in the Church, we find that "those who continued to support the liberation movement migrated to faith-based organisations not supported by the Catholic Church and to secular civil-society organisations in order to continue their faith-based struggle for social justice" (Zegarra 2023b, p. 22), along with those who were expelled or martyred (Lernoux 1990; Smith 1991; Sobrino 2004; Tamayo-Acosta and Alvarenga 2014; Galán 2016; Tamayo-Acosta and Romero 2019; López de Goicoechea Zabala 2021). The reason for this abandonment (voluntary or coerced) is to be found in the reaction of the institutions against liberation theology. Both the states and the Church itself made numerous attempts to stamp out the movement, resulting in the emptying of the ex-church ranks of these liberationist Catholics.

Therefore, it is not simply neoliberalism that has encouraged this bleeding, but, in addition to this, a loss of confidence in the Catholic Church that has resulted in a pluralistic abandonment (Figure 3). It is not about people abandoning the Catholic Church for

Pentecostalism due to neoliberalism and its configuration of society and subjects. Instead, what we are witnessing is a loss of trust in the Catholic Church influenced by a variety of factors. This abandonment may take the form either of a turning away from religion or an embracing of other religious traditions. Neoliberalism's role in this departure is linked to the dismantling of previous social constructs and belief systems. This helps explain why Pentecostalism may be gaining more popularity than liberationist positions today, but it does not necessarily imply a direct transition from one group to another.

The relationship between the rise of one movement and the demise of the other is not direct but mediated by new social conditions that favour adherence to the former rather than the latter, as we will try to see in the next section.

6. On Religion in the Neoliberal Age

Based on the conceptual framework outlined above, the aim at this point is to comprehend the connection between the demise of liberation theology and the emergence of Pentecostalism within the emergence and expansion of the Neoliberal Age.

As stated by Aguirre (2021), it is not entirely accurate to identify neoliberalism with Pentecostalism. While this is true, there are several characteristics of Pentecostalism that make it a suitable religion for the Neoliberal Age—as it points to Pentecostalism's approaches to neoliberal regimes such as Pinochet's (Lindhardt 2013). This connection is not made in a direct way, i.e., by saying that Pentecostalism is neoliberal. On the contrary, it is about linking the rise of Pentecostalism and the fall of liberation theology indirectly, through neoliberalism.

During the last third of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a revolution in the socio-religious landscape in Latin America. This was not only due to the significant increase in the number of conversions that we have witnessed, but also because it has led to the decline and weakening of Catholicism on the continent, despite its remaining the predominant religion in the region, with Brazil currently having the highest number of Catholics in the world (Pew Research Center 2013, 2014). Even in places where popular culture sometimes seems to be intertwined with a Catholic identity (Mariz 1994; Bastian 1994, 1997; Lehmann 1996), the influence of Catholicism has been affected.

Latin America has thus found itself immersed in a postsecular process that has unveiled and exploited the possibilities within the religious field and market. It is a market in which Catholicism seems to have relied on its establishment across the Latin American territory and its integration into the culture and distinct characteristics of the region to address the new challenges of the postsecular society.

However, it has not received the impetus that liberation theology could have provided in this process, as its influence and operational capacity have been diminished by the paradigm shift it has undergone and its consequences for social participation and mobilisation (Vásquez 1998). This reality has rendered it theoretically inadequate to confront present-day issues, not to mention the internal assassination attempts from within the Catholic Church and the influence of various regimes and states (Lernoux 1982, 1990).

Likewise, there has been a shift in the very structure of society with the triumph of neoliberalism, which has prompted a change in paradigms and social imaginaries, thereby diminishing the previous forms of politics in the face of the 'end of history' (Fukuyama 2006). This shift has particularly impacted revolutionary left-wing ideologies, potentially including liberation theology within its paradigm.

This neoliberalism has imposed social logics that have extended the market beyond its inherent boundaries worldwide, thus triggering the expansion of the commodity category and its fetishism (Marx 1981; Ramas San Miguel 2018). It has also enforced social disciplining (Vega Jiménez 2019) and acceleration (Rosa 2009, 2013), thereby bolstering the economic power of capital (Mau 2023).

As stated by Jean Pierre Bastian (2017, p. 208), the acceleration of religious change has its origins in the collapse of the previous world

> that annihilated national liberation movements and imposed neoliberal economic models. The collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and its repercussions on the Cuban and Sandinista regimes, as well as on the left in the region, has left Latin America with a vacuum of ideologies. The ebb of ideologies has been matched by a proliferation of defensive and communitarian withdrawal behaviours, with religious sociability at their core. Alongside this process, the globalisation of the supply of symbolic goods of salvation and the multiplication of new religious movements of various kinds have led to a mutation of the religious field. The success of the new religious movements is primarily due to the possibility they offer to marginalised sections of the population to restructure themselves.

In this new world, Pentecostalism has undergone a rapid and intense ascension, a trajectory that has gained strength notably during the latter half of the 20th century. This acceleration coincided with the implementation of a neoliberal economic model and its implications for politics, economy, and society (Bastian 1997, p. 208), with its principal consequence being poverty and inequality (Ramírez Calzadilla 2008, p. 98), along with the expansion of the religious market and the progress in its (post)secular process.

Both liberation theology—through its CEBs as groups of progressive Catholic praxis—and Pentecostalism are both religions whose constituency is made up of the poor, and both religious movements develop strategies for coping with it (Mariz 1994; Lehmann 1996; Cox 2001; Pew Research Center 2014). However, despite belonging to the same social groups, those who are a part of one movement or the other have different social and political views, and their strategies are therefore different (Mariz 1994).

Pentecostalism aims to build community ties that overcome the crisis of social participation and build a sense of community and mutual support to consolidate strategies and ways of coping with poverty. It provides its members with a strict discipline based on traditional values (Lehmann 1996; Sendra 2023; Pew Research Center 2014, pp. 69–86, 95–98), with a high esteem for work and economic wealth derived from their faith and the grace obtained by it (Pew Research Center 2014). This would impose a social disciplining on work that would enable its individual members to improve their living circumstances—such as addictions[4] or personal and family issues (Pew Research Center 2014, p. 78)—and focus on their social growth within the current system and its community.

To this end, Pentecostals seem not to question the socio-economic system, as liberationists would do. In fact, its strategies for coping with poverty would hardly "ever support measures departing significantly from the neoliberalism which now reigns supreme in the entire region" (Lehmann 1996, p. 217). Pentecostalism—characterised by prosperity theology, according to which the obedient and faithful are blessed materially by God. (Garrard-Burnett 2013; Aguirre 2021)—will encourage its followers to seek economic stability within the system itself through tireless hard work and saving (Mariz 1994, pp. 129–30; Pew Research Center 2014, pp. 87–94), waiting for grace to be granted to them through wealth.

> Pentecostalism differs from the other religions because it relates economic and work success to God's blessing. At the theoretical level, it presents a religious work ethic that is not found in other religions among the poor. This work ethic, however, is transformed at the practical level of everyday life. Pentecostalism simply provides its followers with a religious meaning to their search for jobs and security (Mariz 1994, p. 123).

While membership in the Pentecostal community allows one to dedicate one's life to work in order to improve the economic situation of its members (Martin 1990; Lehmann 1996; Cox 2001), participation in the BECs—as well as in trade unions, the labour movement, and social movements—can lead to a loss of stability: "both CEBs and the job are time-consuming, and CEBs require an ideological attitude that may conflict with that required by the job market" (Mariz 1994, p. 47).

Pentecostalism tends to find its social core within those who are in the lowest social strata (Mariz 1994; Lehmann 1996; Pew Research Center 2014, pp. 109–15), so they tend to seek survival strategies. Contrastingly, CEB members, while belonging to the lower classes,

would have a certain economic and social stability without which they might not be able to participate in the community effectively (Mariz 1994). As their own survival depends on finding rapid solutions, the impoverished masses in an accelerated society cannot wait for liberation, while those who have achieved a certain stability will be able to dedicate some time in their lives to the community:

> CEBs and Pentecostal churches seem to function to solve different problems and satisfy different needs. People from CEBs seem to have already improved their lives within the limitations of their class. Pentecostals, by contrast, tend to convert because of their difficulties in surviving poverty (Mariz 1994, p. 50).

While CEBs cope with poverty through communitarian strategies that seek to appease or eradicate the very root causes of poverty (Mariz 1994, p. 119), Pentecostals tend to, albeit through community support, help individuals with its basic problems (Mariz 1994; Lehmann 1996) without eradicating the very causes of poverty. However, liberation theology would have it that, on the contrary, this helps the assimilation of these individuals into "the dreams of triumphant neoliberalism" (Lehmann 1996).

Moreover, the limited time outside of work plays a crucial role in the levels of participation between the two movements. The CEBs involve a necessary—and even mandatory—participation and activism to try to improve the situation of the whole community, without any certainty that this will happen and at the risk of their lives. The lack of available time due to personal and social situations "would tend to keep people from participating in CEBs, rather than draw them to these groups, as is the case with Pentecostal churches" (Mariz 1994, p. 46). The difference between the two phenomena therefore lies in participation and the way in which it occurs in the accelerated society of neoliberalism.

Therefore, we may observe that members of each movement exhibit drastically different mindsets. These, however, are effects of conversion rather than the grounds for it. There is no conversion to Pentecostalism by impoverished Catholic groups solely due to the promise of a job. Similarly, their attitude does not predispose them to embrace Pentecostalism.

The question lies in which group has a better chance of progressing in a certain social setting. Pentecostal churches flourish due to the characteristics of neoliberal societies, since they are better suited to its circumstances, whereas liberation theology loses supporters and is incapable of attracting new members because it cannot offer a viable alternative for the present. There is no direct transfer, but it is mediated by the socio-ontological conditions in which they develop. It is not about a direct transfer, but about the organisational strength of each movement within the Neoliberal Age.

Pentecostalism adapts well to the characteristics of the neoliberal society. It effectively addresses the challenges posed by the accelerated, market-driven world of neoliberalism, attracting followers with its promises of individual empowerment, spiritual fulfilment, and personal improvement. This adaptability contributes to its growth and popularity among people seeking meaning and stability in the face of the changing dynamics of the Neoliberal Age.

The acceleration of neoliberal society and its social imaginaries and possibilities may be the cause of the high engagement in Pentecostal churches as opposed to the comparatively low participation in CEBs. This does not imply that because of the acceleration people choose to attend the Pentecostal church rather than the liberation church. What is meant is that because of this increased pace, a movement such as liberation theology cannot obtain adequate support.

This scenario, along with the fact that it is rooted in outdated social imaginaries that are no longer commonly accepted by society, inhibits liberation theology from developing in the present, whereas Pentecostalism keeps expanding. There is no immediacy between the decline of one and the rise of the other, but it is mediated by the economic, social, and cultural conditions in which they are circumscribed.

Likewise, the (post)secular process in which Latin America has embarked has also influenced this bleeding. Secularisation has mostly affected the Catholic Church, while

Pentecostalism has managed to navigate secularisation due to its social constitution (Mariz 1994; Lehmann 1996; Cox 2001, 2013).

On the other hand, liberation theology, as a result of its demise, has witnessed a bleeding in its ranks to secular positions (Zegarra 2023b, p. 22), or an eventual abandonment of faith. In this respect, the harassment of liberation theology by the Church has played a role, as members of the Church of the Poor have witnessed that they were not welcome within the ecclesiastical ranks. This situation has caused a crisis of participation within the liberation church itself, affecting its organisational capacity to counter the Pentecostal advance within the religious field, as religious people have abandoned the church in favour of secular options.

With the demise of liberation theology and its inability to survive, the Catholic Church lost its capacity to provide adequate responses to the current situation. This failure of radical Catholicism, coupled with the anomie of the masses which translates into the crisis of participation (Bastian 1997), provided an opportunity for other denominations to fill the void left by the Catholic Church.

If liberation theology wants to survive the present time, and not only survive but regain the influence it once enjoyed, it must embark on a process of radical self-criticism that prepares it for the tasks and demands of the present. This self-criticism must be twofold, addressing not only the theory and categories of analysis, but also the transformative praxis itself and its popular participation (Rieger and Silva 2023).

It must reconsider and update the way in which it constitutes and builds social movements in a radically new world, where the possibility of a post-capitalism future seems to have disappeared and new realities arise that need to be addressed (Althaus-Reid 2007; Cooper 2013). A task does not only belong to liberation theology but to all emancipatory movements. They must have the capability to produce the optimal conditions for their (re)emergence.

7. Conclusions

The social conditions emerging with the Neoliberal Age provoke a structural change that renders obsolete the social imaginaries and the conditions on which liberation theology—along with the rest of revolutionary social movements that emerged in the 20th Century—was based. Additionally, the accelerated neoliberal society and its economic power constitute a barrier to participation in transformative social movements and their capacity to articulate an alternative. The defeat of which we have been speaking is not, therefore, exclusive to liberation theology, but constitutive of the emancipatory movements in the Neoliberal Age.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall—and, hence, the demise of the soviet bloc, the social imaginaries that encouraged revolution and social emancipation in which context liberation theology emerged, have disappeared. This fact allowed neoliberalism (which radicalises and deepens the social laws of capital) to spread across the globe. This situation ended up consolidating a particular socio-ontological reality in which social acceleration ended up constituting the neoliberal individual and subsuming them under the laws of the market.

The rise of Pentecostalism and the decline of liberation theology are not directly related, but are related through the situation in which they find themselves in neoliberal society and the way they adapt to or cope with it. While liberation theology fails to maintain its relevance and influence—because its theoretical and conceptual frameworks belong to outdated social imaginaries, which belong to an earlier era, as Pope Francis would argue—Pentecostalism is able to address the needs of neoliberalism for its followers on different terms, managing to adapt and assimilate to neoliberalism thanks to the ethics and discipline that characterise them. This does not mean that Pentecostalism is neoliberal, but that the way it is organised is more favourable to the Neoliberal Age lifestyle. It does not involve as active a militancy as liberation theology and the CEBs. Its mode of participation is more easily adapted to neoliberal individuality and the way in which a community is constituted within it.

The demise of liberation theology and the emergence and rise of Pentecostalism are, therefore, related to the former's inability and the latter's ability to address the needs of a neoliberal society. While liberation theology (along with the CEBs) remains rooted in the social imaginaries of a previous reality, Pentecostalism adapts and aligns itself with the characteristics of the new neoliberal society. The Pentecostal movement's capability to address poverty, combined with the incapacity of liberation theology (and the Catholic Church) to offer a real alternative, has led to its triumph.

Liberation theology is incapable of attracting new members, as well as engaging more deeply or even retaining the existing ones, while Pentecostalism continues to grow among the impoverished populations of the continent. Maybe their respective target audiences are different, but while one (Pentecostalism) continues to grow relentlessly, the other (liberation theology) struggles to stay afloat.

The inability to organise a social praxis in the face of the acceleration and commodification inherent in neoliberalism, as well as the inability to develop critical social imaginaries, contributes for this discrepancy in the ability to adapt to the new social reality. Pentecostalism advances because it can respond to people's needs in a changing society, whereas liberation theology struggles as it finds it difficult to adapt and provide valuable solutions to the problems brought on by neoliberalism.

The task of liberation theology is, now, two-fold: it must strive to establish an appropriate social foundation while providing it with a theory capable of, firstly, shaping that social base, and secondly, addressing the needs and capabilities of the present to shape a liberatory praxis, thus building the appropriate conditions to regain relevance.

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Notes

1. This question could be the subject of several works of analysis. What is meant by this is that the social acceleration that Rosa exposes is but one of the logics of capital analysed by Marx in his Critique of Political Economy (Marx 1981). It is that mute compulsion (Mau 2023) which confines individuals to a social praxis which they must reproduce in their social relations, both within and outside the factory confines of labour. Social acceleration is the logic of capital applied to the time of life as it unfolds in the capitalist system. A blind drive that involves all individuals to keep on producing and consuming; a perpetual reproduction of capitalist totality from the social praxis that determines it. This would be a dialectical functioning similar to that of the social imaginaries discussed above. It is the action of individuals that reproduces the logics of capital, which determine the relations and social praxis in which the capitalist subject is involved (Marx 1981; Adorno 2006, 2007; Maiso 2022). Hence the totalitarianism attributed to capitalist society.
2. It concerns all kinds of subjects, including individuals, states, organisations, corporations, and more, who develop social relations subordinated to capital (Heinrich 2012).
3. In the electoral outcome of 2018, it can be observed that the religious group that supported Bolsonaro and *Partido Social Liberal* (PSL) the most were the Pentecostals. Let's not forget that all religious and non-religious groups predominantly supported Bolsonaro. Among each of the groups (where majorities supported the PSL candidate), the highest support was received from the Pentecostals, with 76.24%. Among Catholics, 54.27% supported him; 62.5% of traditional Protestants and 46.67% of the unaffiliated also supported Bolsonaro (Sendra 2023). The highest support for *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT, Workers' Party) among these groups came from Catholics, who voted for the party at a rate of 31.41%. The traditional Protestants came in second with 23.96% of the vote; PT garnered the least amount of support from Pentecostals, at 14.36% (Sendra 2023).
4. According to Pew Research Center (2014, p. 78): "Protestants tend to object to alcohol consumption more strongly than do Catholics. In most countries, clear majorities of Protestants say that drinking alcohol is morally wrong. Among Catholics, opinion is more divided. In about half of the countries surveyed, majorities of Catholics say that they have moral objections to drinking alcohol. But elsewhere, half of Catholics or fewer say that drinking alcohol is morally wrong".

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