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Between the Religious and the Secular: Latin American Neo-Pentecostalism in a Context of Multiple Modernities

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Abstract: This article seeks to understand neo-Pentecostalism in Latin America as a religious and political movement within the framework of multiple modernities, based on an ethnographic study in evangelical churches in Chile and Mexico. The study focuses on two main axes: the discourse of the “Kingdom of God” and the experience of the Holy Spirit. The former explores the conception of public space, while the latter examines the experiential dimensions, both individual and collective, that confer meaning and legitimacy to this religious movement. Neo-Pentecostalism emerges as a complex phenomenon where religion and politics intertwine in novel ways, responding to the intricacies of the region. Contrary to the notion of a monolithic and reactionary movement, this article demonstrates how neo-Pentecostalism is a movement that navigates the interstices between the religious and the secular.

Keywords: neo-Pentecostalism; secularization; Evangelicalism; Holy Spirit; religion; politics

1. Introduction

Neo-Pentecostalism, as an analytical category, has been used to understand the presence of a new generation of evangelicals, especially involved in politics from neoconservative ranks. On one hand, large sectors of the Protestant–Evangelical field view it as a religious movement that threatens “sound doctrine”, considering it a theological distortion linked to apostasy and so-called “false prophets” (Garrard-Burnett 2013). On the other hand, it has caused great commotion in society due to the political activism of its leaders (Ramos and Cabrera 2020; Tec-López 2020; Carpio 2021). Recent studies have shown that neo-Pentecostalism manifests differently in various cultural and political contexts (Reu 2019; Palecek and Tazlar 2021; Orogun 2023), indicating that it is a phenomenon that has gained relevance not only within local settings but also across various countries.

This movement is often considered the third wave of Pentecostal–Charismatic Christianity, following classical Pentecostalism and the Charismatic renewal movement, and its distinctive traits would be the prosperity gospel and active involvement in neoconservatives’ politics, setting it apart from non-charismatic evangelical movements. However, scholars such as Leite de Moraes (2010), Jaimes (2012, 2020), Jaimes and Montalvo (2018), and Tec-López (2020) argue that neo-Pentecostalism is more than just the third wave of Pentecostalism, as this model has been constructed primarily by observing the evolution of Protestantism in the United States. Therefore, this North American-centered view is a crucial component to consider when attempting to fit this model into the Latin American reality.¹

The term “neo-Pentecostalism” was first used in 1963 by Russell Hitt in *Eternity* magazine to describe Protestant churches practicing the gifts of the Holy Spirit but rejecting the Pentecostal label. While originally termed “Charismatic renewal” by its leaders, the concept evolved into an analytical category in North America and later in Latin America, where it was used to explain the intersection of religious practices (Burgess and van der Maas 2002; Freston 1999).



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This has led to a generalized notion of this phenomenon as a new ultraconservative evangelical movement with clear opposition to the LGBTI+ and feminist agendas, and whose main objective is to use political power to rebuild society from Christian moral precepts (Pérez 2018; Oro 2018; García-Ruiz and Michel 2014; Carpio 2021). While it is often assumed that these groups are politically driven, this article seeks to explore the religious and sociocultural dynamics that complicate such a simplified narrative. Although political engagement is evident, the lived religious experiences of congregants offer a more nuanced view.

In Latin America, a region characterized by sociocultural, political, and economic fractures, tensions, and contradictions, it has been suggested that, unlike Western Europe where religious indifference has prevailed, there is a revitalization of the symbolic religious². In other words, secularization has had different and multiple impacts, allowing for the rearrangement and reconfiguration of the religious (Hervieu-Leger 1999) due to its multidimensional character (Dobbelaere 1981). Consequently, we are witnessing processes of pluralization in the religious field as a sign of a very particular Latin American religious modernity, not as a consequence of a “reenchantment or resacralization of societies” (Cox 1994; Berger 1999).

It is from this context that this article seeks to understand neo-Pentecostalism as a religious and political movement within a scenario of multiple modernities,³ based on an ethnographic study in evangelical churches in Chile and Mexico. Specifically, this article addresses the following research questions: How do the discourses of the “Kingdom of God” and the experiential dimensions of the Holy Spirit contribute to the political and religious influence of neo-Pentecostalism in these contexts? And how does neo-Pentecostalism, through these axes, shape modernity in Latin America by blending religious and political spheres? We mainly focus on two axes of observation: the discourse of the “Kingdom of God” and the experience of the Holy Spirit. The first one points to the way of conceiving the public space, and the second one, on the other hand, inquires into the experiential dimensions, both individual and collective, that give meaning and legitimacy to this religious movement. In this regard, neo-Pentecostalism presents itself as a phenomenon that responds to the complexity of a region where religion and politics intertwine in novel ways (Adriance 1992; Olson 2006). Unlike the image of a monolithic and reactionary movement, the article shows how neo-Pentecostalism is a movement that navigates the interstices between the religious and the secular.

In the following sections, the reader will first find the methodology used to achieve the results of this study. We then move on to a review of the literature on neo-Pentecostalism in Latin America to provide context for the analysis. In Section 4, we delve into the concept of multiple modernities and secularization in the region. Section 5 examines the discourse of the Kingdom of God and how it is employed within evangelical groups associated with neo-Pentecostalism. In Section 6, we explore the experiential aspect of religious practice, focusing on the Holy Spirit as a symbol that shapes the beliefs and practices of believers. Finally, we conclude this article with final reflections on the findings and broader implications.

2. The Methodological Route

To address this phenomenon, ethnographic research was carried out in evangelical churches in Chile and Mexico, two countries that, despite their differences, share common elements in relation to the development of neo-Pentecostalism and its political impact. In this sense, most of the research that has been performed in the region has focused on countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Costa Rica, or Argentina, nations where the presence and political impact of the evangelical megachurches associated with this phenomenon has been seen with greater notoriety. On the other hand, in Chile and Mexico, the phenomenon is somewhat diffuse, since until a few years ago, there were no evangelical megachurches of the neo-Pentecostal type with a significant political presence at the national level, as is the case in the other countries. Furthermore, in Chile, historically,

Creole Pentecostalism has been hegemonic in the evangelical field, whereas in Mexico, traditional Pentecostalism, although it has been the majority, has coexisted with other evangelical movements such as historic Protestantism and the Light of the World church.

In order to carry out this research, the following research techniques were used: (1) participant observation in eight evangelical churches (four in each country) with emphasis on understanding the internal dynamics of the organizations and the ways of acting in the world; (2) semi-structured interviews with leaders, members and former members, with the purpose of understanding their theological, political, and social perspectives; and (3) documentary and digital review of publications and materials produced by the churches such as newsletters, sermons, institutional documents, and activities in social media. The period in which the fieldwork was carried out corresponds to the years 2019 and 2021 in the cities of Santiago de Chile, Mexico City, and Merida, Mexico.

3. Cartographies of Neo-Pentecostalism in Latin America

This section provides a comprehensive review of how neo-Pentecostalism has manifested across Latin America, revealing the diverse ways in which the movement has developed throughout the region.

The first findings of the research show that, in Latin America, neo-Pentecostalism has been configured from different historical trajectories and sociopolitical, economic, and cultural conditions. The works of [Jaimes \(2020\)](#) and [Tec-López \(2022\)](#) show that the trajectory of this phenomenon is diffuse to trace and can be assumed as a “movement” or “current” that has been amalgamated from various evangelical expressions and historical moments ([Fediakova 2015](#)).

While it is true that neo-Pentecostalism shares a common cultural matrix with other Pentecostal expressions, involving a worldview based on the experience of the Holy Spirit and the struggle against the devil and the forces of evil, it is also characterized by nuances and singularities of each national context that make it different from other regions ([Reu 2019](#)). In fact, anthropological research has shown a great diversity of forms and manifestations of this phenomenon, even within the same country ([Diara and Onah 2014](#)).

It could be argued that the most emblematic case, and the one for which most research has been conducted in Latin America, is that of Brazil. The works of [Freston \(1993, 1999\)](#), [Mariano \(1996, 1999\)](#), and [Silveira \(2000\)](#), among others, have become classics in the academic literature, solidifying neo-Pentecostalism as an analytical category and making visible a new ecclesial model that had been gaining strength since the emergence of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. The growth and influence of this church brought it into the public eye, especially as its members began participating in national politics. Years later, in 2018, they successfully consolidated the “Evangelical Parliamentary Group”, which included 199 deputies and 4 senators, all aligned around moral issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage.

This phenomenon has not been exclusive to Brazil, as other countries have witnessed the emergence of evangelical actors promoting the slogan of “moralization” and profound societal transformation. These movements oppose government corruption, whether from the left or right, as well as the “gay lobby” and the globalist agenda of the global economic elite and the institutions that represent it. Over the past 10 years, the region has been increasingly involved in a sociopolitical scenario in which the controversy surrounding religion within political, electoral, and legislative contexts has intensified.

In Colombia, the long-anticipated Peace Agreement between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces was blocked by the negative outcome of the 2016 plebiscite. Among the causes attributed to this result was the influence of evangelical groups, most notably one of the country’s largest neo-Pentecostal megachurches: the International Charismatic Mission (ICM) ([Basset 2018](#)). The reasons for the rejection had to do mainly with the idea that the “gay” and communist agenda was behind the agreement.

In Costa Rica, Christian singer Fabricio Alvarado ran for the presidency in 2018 for the evangelical National Restoration Party, winning the first round over the official candidate

Carlos Alvarado. His campaign was based on the defense of the family and traditional values. Fabricio Alvarado's "militancy" within a neo-Pentecostal megachurch and his closeness to the famous pastor–apostle Rony Chaves (Carpio 2021) made him popular in the rural areas of the country.

In the same region, one of the first countries to show strong evangelical participation in politics was Guatemala. It was the first nation to have an evangelical president, Efraín Ríos Montt (1983–1984), who came to power through a coup d'état and was legitimized by the U.S. government and neo-Pentecostal pastors. After him, other evangelicals came to the presidential chair, but on these occasions through democratic means: Jorge Serrano Elías (1991–1993) and Jimmy Morales (2016–2020).

In the Argentine case, there has been a constant dispute in the field of morality, especially due to the Law on the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy passed in 2020. In this context, pro-life groups assumed an important role together with a wide participation of neo-Pentecostal evangelical churches and religious political leaders, which reframed the question about the secularity of the State and the place of religious ideas in legislative discussions (Felitti and Prieto 2018).

In Peru, the "Don't Mess with My Kids" movement emerged from evangelical ranks in 2016 as a form of protest against public policies with a gender perspective that the government was trying to implement in education and other areas of public administration (Meneses 2019). On the other hand, in Bolivia, some evangelical groups supported the coup government of Jeanine Añez and the leadership of Luis Fernando Camacho, both belonging to Roman Catholicism, linked to the far right, and featured in episodes with great symbolic–religious significance involving Bibles and crucifixes inside state buildings.

In Chile, evangelicals gained media notoriety in the context of legislative processes such as the Civil Union Agreement (2011), the Zamudio Law or Anti-Discrimination Law (2012), the Civil Unions Recognition Law (2015), Abortion on Three Grounds (2017), and the Gender Identity Law (2018). Several neo-Pentecostal leaders raised their voices to express their rejection of the promulgation of these laws (Tec-López 2022).

Finally, in Mexico, we observed the emergence of a political party with a confessional origin. Its founder is a Christian lawyer linked to neo-Pentecostal churches (Garma 2019). Despite the fact that legally, confessional parties cannot exist, the Partido Encuentro Social (PES), which was later renamed Partido Encuentro Solidario, accompanied the then-presidential candidate of the coalition Juntos Haremos Historia, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, to his triumph in 2018. This event generated enormous criticism for him by linking himself to an "anti-rights" party.

As we can observe, the evangelical groups known as neo-Pentecostals have acquired relevance as new political actors, breaking into conservative political organizations, consolidating strategic ties with political parties and influencing the public agenda and legislative discussions. Considering this, it has been stated that the evangelical presence in the public and political space responds to the arrival of a new generation that has left behind what Lalive D'Epinay (1969) called the "refuge for the masses", to consolidate itself as a new relevant citizen force with an interest in sociopolitical incidence (Fediakova and Parker 2009). This new attitude of openness has been attributed to what Pérez (2018) calls an "evident neo-Pentecostal spirit", whereby renewed evangelicals, with reconstructionist pretensions and with an emphasis on reaching the middle and upper classes, have become the new Latin American face and the new social, cultural, and political actors of the continental evangelical movement, challenging the classical theories of secularization and threatening secular laws.

We can thus say that the neo-Pentecostal phenomenon points to a series of characteristics associated with the new forms of political incidence of evangelical groups. These bring a more complex background than just positioning themselves within the political field, namely, religious symbols underlie deeply felt experiences with the sacred and build new ways of looking at social reality and, therefore, religious action is manifested in multiple ways, not only within the temples but also in the public space.

Among the characteristics attributed to these groups, the following stand out: (1) they promote the discourse of economic prosperity as a divine end; (2) they make use of marketing and massmediatization of faith; (3) in general, their parishioners have a middle-class, young, and professional profile, although we can find these groups in all socioeconomic sectors; (4) they industrialize religious music from a market logic, but without leaving aside religious sentiment; (5) they seek to grow numerically and establish megachurches; (6) they develop different models of the ecclesial organization; (7) they assume theological doctrines such as spiritual warfare and divine healing, maintaining elements of the Pentecostal charisma; (8) they seek to articulate themselves to influence politics; and (9) they sustain a greater openness to the world⁴, that is, they overcome the sacred/profane, church/world dichotomy, as they assume themselves as relevant citizens. These characteristics are among the most commonly found in studies on neo-Pentecostalism, but they are not always present in all churches, which makes the phenomenon diffuse and complex to delimit. In this sense, neo-Pentecostalism strains the secularization processes of the modern agenda, representing a movement that evidences the blurred boundaries between the religious and secular fields.

4. Between the Religious and the Secular

From the Western European notion of the modern agenda, religion was seen as an element that hindered the progress of societies and, therefore, had to disappear or be relegated to the private sphere. This conception was called secularization, a process inherent to the program of modernity. This made it possible to explain the apparent decline of religious sentiment, on the one hand, and the reconfiguration and pluralization of the religious field on the other (Casanova 2006; Taylor 2007).

The concept of “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt 2000) helps us to understand how modernity manifests itself differently across various cultural and historical contexts. Rather than seeing modernity as a singular, Western-dominated trajectory, this framework recognizes that different societies negotiate their own forms of modernity, blending local religious, political, and cultural elements. In Latin America, for example, neo-Pentecostalism emerges as a case where modernity is shaped not by the secularization thesis but by a persistent intertwining of the sacred and the secular. This view challenges the traditional notion that modernity leads to the inevitable decline of religion, showing instead how new forms of spirituality and religious practices, such as the prosperity gospel and the direct experience of the Holy Spirit, adapt to and influence modern sociopolitical realities (Parker 2019). By embracing these divergent paths, the framework of multiple modernities allows us to see how neo-Pentecostalism, far from being an anomaly, is a legitimate expression of modern religious and political life in the region.

Instead of speaking of a single modernity, we are witnessing a history of the constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs, tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities (Eisenstadt 2000). Thus, conceiving modernity as multiple allows us to see it as a non-global or homogeneous fact but structured according to different dimensions. Thus, after 9/11, we entered a stage where the crisis of modern enlightened reason—and its anti-religious bias—was called into question. The attacks of 9/11 revealed the resurgence of religion in the public sphere. This event marked a significant turning point in the reconsideration of the secularization thesis (Philpott 2002; Torpey 2012). The sudden rise of Islamic fundamentalism, coupled with a broader global reaction against the West, brought into focus various religious movements, including the evangelical revivalist right wing linked to neo-Pentecostalism, Catholic integrist sectors, and Jewish fundamentalism. For these movements, modern secular civilization represented a profound threat to their religious values (Casanova 2006; Beriain 2006).

Consequently, neo-Pentecostalism in Latin America presents itself as a religious phenomenon that challenges the classical notion of secularization, as we see how this type of religious expression is increasingly present in the public debate and in the configuration of the political agenda in the countries of the region. For Eisenstadt, modernity is on an

“endless trial” (Eisenstadt 2000, p. 26), for we also wonder how these elements, which were once considered pre-modern, medieval, and even barbaric, now appear in the heart of an advanced modernity, with science, technology, and a free and self-regulated market. Has modernity failed to achieve the establishment of that civilization in which the rational individual would enjoy a life in complete plenitude?

In this sense, religious sentiment was constantly challenged by the processes of secularization included in the modern program. But, as De Melo Magalhaes (2013) points out, it is in religion where the unfinished project of Western modernity had its greatest attack and defeat. Religion acquired different functions in the various modernities. In Western Europe (Latin–Mediterranean), institutional religion, headed by Roman Catholicism, was depoliticized in some nations to give way to the creation of the modern non-confessional state. In the United States, the religious maintained its undoubted presence in the fundamentalist evangelical movement, which inherently possesses a modern character (Eisenstadt 1999, 2000). Likewise, the American “civil religion” (Bellah 1967) allowed the development of an internal cultural diversification, as a mosaic or melting pot of the ideas and social movements contained in the collective identity of the nation (Glazer and Moynihan 1963).

In Latin America, on the other hand, logic and developments were conceived as distinct from what happened in the Global North. This region is characterized as a field in constant transformation, the result of the sedimentation and juxtaposition of different processes, composed of nations that share the Catholic colonial heritage and the intertwining of indigenous and African traditions, as well as the condition of being inserted in an increasingly globalized world and in which neoliberalism has allowed the transformation of social dynamics and the links of people with the religious (García-García 1994; Watts 2019; Onwuegbuchulam 2019):

“Unlike in the North, where the transformations of the religious field occur on the foundation of a society that since the Reformation is already multi-religious, highly exposed to an enlightened and rationalist culture, and in which the Protestant ethos constitutes one of the cultural matrices that has an elective affinity with the capitalist spirit, as Weber suggested, in Latin America the religious transformation takes place on the basis of a symbolic cultural and religious structure with rituals of strong Ibero-Catholic-Indigenous-African connotation, where the syncretisms characteristic of the Latin American popular religions operate as “a different logic” from which the old traditions are reconstructed and new ones emerge”. (Parker 1998, p. 20)

In other words, the pattern is one of evolving associations, connections, and overlaps between the different religious systems, their institutions, and the “ordinary believers” who redefine, reformulate, and reconfigure religious beliefs and practices. Likewise, religious plurality in Latin America resists binary classifications or rigid opposition between modernity and tradition, secular and sacred, as it is precisely in places where the imprint of the sacred is strongest that the impact of modernization is also most intensely felt (Nash 2017; Rieger 2023).

It is exactly in this “in-between” (Bhabha 1990) that the various manifestations of the sacred are gestated and transformed into heterodox models of religious practices. Thus, neo-Pentecostalism emerges as a product of the popular reconstruction of magic and spirituality that does not necessarily pass through institutionalized churches, ecclesiastical authorities, or religious experts, although they are still needed as positive, negative, or legitimizing references (Parker 2019). Instead, it is individuals who form collectivities, who create, choose, complement, and resignify their relationship with the sacred and the religious, and build collectives.

The religious field therefore results in a specific network of micro and macro social relations in constant imbrication and tension with other fields. A network of connectivity that points to a diversity of religious institutionality, syncretism, pluralism, hybridization, mutations, and lines of leakage, as well as double affiliations, interactions between religious systems, neo-magic, charisma, neo-shamanism, and a wide range of new spiritualities.

We cease to conceive of a single Catholicism, a single Christianity, or a single Pentecostalism, and the “-isms” become plural, diverse, and multiple.

5. The Utopia of the Kingdom of God: A Neo-Pentecostal Vanguard?

One of the predominant narratives explaining the active participation of evangelicals is that of the establishment of the Kingdom of God. While there are other interpretations of this theological concept within Christian traditions, the most common understanding within neo-Pentecostalism emphasizes the conquest of new territories through the expansion of the word of God to the ends of the earth. This interpretation merges both traditional elements and hypermodern strategies (Oro 2018). According to Chaves and Zúñiga (2018), the neo-Pentecostal strategy entails (1) the formation of alliances with hegemonic and neoliberal sectors to “share” power and (2) the consolidation of a conservative agenda on basic human rights, functioning as a political catalyst for the imposition of neoliberal political agendas.

We can identify three doctrinal and theological influences that are inscribed in this narrative:

1. Evangelical fundamentalism. This emerged as an important ideological source at the beginning of the 20th century (Gallagher 2004) and promoted the recovery of a supposed primitive purity of Christianity, the rejection of liberalism and secular modernity, and the affirmation of a patriarchal hierarchical social order impervious to change. Its origins date back to the publication of *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of Truth* (Torrey and Dixon 1917) in 1910, which reacted against biblical criticism that questioned the inerrancy and infallibility of the Scriptures.

2. Dominion Theology. This arose in the 1970s with Pastor Jerry Fallwell and other Christian leaders who tried to position themselves within politics in the United States. They assumed a sovereignty of ecclesial power over political power with the aim of Christianizing the state in an evangelical Constantinian version. Clarkson (2005) lists three characteristics that are shared by all types of dominionism: (1) They celebrate Christian nationalism, in the sense that they believe that the United States was once, and should be again, a Christian nation. (2) They promote religious supremacy, in that they generally do not respect the equality of other religions, or even other variants of Christianity. (3) They endorse theocratic views, in that they believe that the Ten Commandments should be the foundation of American law, and that the Constitution should be seen as a vehicle for implementing biblical principles.

3. Christian Reconstructionism. This is a postmillennialist narrative of the Kingdom of God originated by Rousas Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, and Gary North in the United States in the 1980s. It has had a great influence on the Christian right in that country and is promoted as a philosophy that seeks to consolidate a Christian theocracy under the Old Testament Law. This is due to the threats of the disintegration of the patriarchal authority of the family, the moral problem of divorce, abortion laws, and the political rights of Latinos, Black people, and LGBTI+ people (Amat 2004). They consider that the Bible should be the universal standard of justice and lash out strongly against queer people, claiming that the death penalty is God’s approved punishment (North 1999).

In this way, such doctrines were exported to Latin America through the Pentecostal and charismatic preachers of the 1970s and 1980s, whose discourses encouraged the construction of a new way of living religious practice, since before the second half of the 20th century, Evangelicals in the region were largely kept out of the spaces of political and public dispute, mainly because of the hegemony of Roman Catholicism and due to theologies that emphasized the separation between religion and politics. Social research affirmed that most evangelical churches had apolitical and antipolitical positions (Fediakova and Parker 2009). However, with the arrival of these foreign doctrines, the Latin American political scene underwent a significant transformation (Owen et al. 1991).

Thus, neo-Pentecostalism is configured as a religious and political movement articulated around a narrative of conquest and territorial expansion of “Christian truth”, which

is expressed in various ways: the control of spaces of political power, the establishment of alliances with hegemonic sectors, direct participation in electoral contests, repositioning in the public and cultural space, and the imposition of a conservative agenda on issues of sexual and gender ethics.

This religious and political position is not only expressed in the region but is part of a global trend that is evident in other contexts such as the United States, Asia, and Africa, where this movement has been at the forefront of the articulation of a strong ultraconservative agenda on issues of sexual and family morality, affecting the rights of women and the LGBTI+ population (B. Martin 2017).

Given this, we ask ourselves, what is happening within the churches that make up this neo-Pentecostal evangelical field? Among the pastors of the churches investigated, the most frequent opinion was not to use the pulpit to orient or guide the faithful to position themselves from any political sector. Alfred Cooper, pastor of the Trinity Anglican Church in Santiago, Chile, maintains that although it is necessary to have Christian senators and deputies, they should be people trained for that purpose:

“We would not be for creating a Christian political party, but rather inserting ourselves into what already exists. There are not enough qualified leaders to form a political party. When we talk about politics, we always have the complex issue of not taking sides [...] From the pulpit, we try to propose biblical principles for everyone to vote as they see fit. But we are not going to move the flock like in the United States to vote for Trump or things like that. I have tried to avoid linking myself with any side.” (A. Cooper, personal communication, 17 February 2020)

This position is shared by most pastors, as there is a genuine need for Christians to hold positions of political power. However, in Cornerstone Mexico and the International Charismatic Mission of Chile (ICM-C), the situation is different. In Cornerstone, the faithful are encouraged to participate in pro-life and pro-family marches. In the case of ICM-C, Pastor Luz Espinal ran as a candidate, first for Councilor and later for Deputy in Santiago de Chile. In their own auditorium, former presidential candidate José Antonio Kast was invited to hold campaign events, demonstrating that the group’s religious spaces are also used for political proselytism:

“No one lights a lamp and places it under the bed; instead, they put it in the highest position to illuminate the entire house. What are the highest places in a nation? One of them is politics. We truly want to fulfill what Jesus commanded: ‘Go and make disciples’. Notice that the original text does not say ‘in all nations’. If it did, we might feel comfortable, being just a small group of believers in this city, in this nation. Instead, it used ‘of’: ‘Make disciples of all nations’, meaning that God’s will is for all nations to become disciples. How can I aim to disciple a nation if I shy away from engaging in areas like politics? The deceptive idea was spread that Christians should not enter the political arena and look at the damage it has caused. But the Bible speaks of kings and priests; we will reign with Him. At ICM, political involvement has been part of our work for many years. Pastor Claudia from Bogotá has served three terms as a senator and ambassador. Several of our pastor friends have also been senators. Today, my wife has been called to enter politics, and we are fully supporting her in this journey.” (R. Perez, Pastor at ICM-C, personal communication, 17 June 2021)

We can observe a clear influence of the theological doctrines that we mentioned before, since ICM-C holds a position of influencing the political field, not only by having Christians in public office, but with the idea of “discipling the nations”, that is, to have political control over the States and their respective governments, in order to impose the “will of God” (Solano 2022). However, this perspective differs from the views of others within the churches. On one hand, Keila from Cornerstone Mexico considers that Christian leaders should not participate in politics:

“Never in life, it’s nonsense. I think it opens the door to mass manipulation. I’ve seen many times where people ask the pastor, ‘Who are you going to vote for?’, and the pastor responds with, ‘No, because the vote is free and secret.’ But there are others who say, ‘Oh, I’m going to vote for Morena.’ And then the whole church follows suit, voting for Morena, or the whole church votes for PAN. I don’t think that’s right, and even less so when a pastor runs for office as a deputy or something similar; I think it’s a serious mistake. It’s one thing to be a Christian, and if you are just a Cristian and get involved, that’s fine, because everyone can believe what they want. But being a leader, a pastor, or an apostle of a church, I don’t see it as appropriate.” (Keila, personal communication, 9 December 2019)

On the other hand, some make a clear distinction between the participation of Christians in politics and the participation of churches in politics. Daniel Rebolledo from the Pentecostal Church of the Trinity (IPETRI) in Chile states it this way:

“Church in politics? Not at all, but Christians in politics? Yes, no problem. It doesn’t mean that a Christian in politics will represent Christians. In fact, I hope a Christian never becomes president, as they are sure to lean towards Christianity, which would do more harm than good, potentially damaging the church’s image in society rather than bringing it closer.” (D. Rebolledo, personal communication, 2 November 2020)

The distinction between “Church in politics” and “Christian in politics” is crucial, especially in the historical and religious context of Chile. While the institutional Church has often positioned itself as a political actor—negotiating, endorsing, or opposing government policies—individual Christians have engaged in politics based on their personal convictions rooted in their faith, which may align with or diverge from the Church’s official stance. [Mansilla and Orellana \(2018\)](#) emphasize that evangelicals have played a significant role in key moments of Chilean history, such as during Pinochet’s dictatorship, where some evangelical leaders supported the regime, seeing it as a protector of Christian values, while others opposed it on moral grounds. Their involvement continued through pivotal events like the formal recognition of non-Catholic churches in Chile and the increasing presence of evangelicals as candidates for public office. This demonstrates that evangelicals have always participated in politics in various forms—sometimes as representatives of church networks of denominations, and other times as individuals whose political engagement is shaped by personal faith. This duality highlights how evangelical political participation in Chile has been both institutional and deeply personal, shaped by theological beliefs as well as by the broader sociopolitical landscape.

This diversity in opinions regarding the way to participate in politics responds to exercises of subjectivation and the agency of each believer to discern and reflect on their own experiences and processes. On the one hand, in leaders and organizations such as ICM-C and Cornerstone Mexico, there is a direct interpellation to the faithful to integrate themselves in the political field, with the purpose of expanding and crystallizing the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, other groups and believers express a position of caution and abstention, both to prevent divisions in the religious community and to avoid adverse effects on the public image of the church.

It has been the ecclesiastical leadership who have taken political initiatives and have been mediatized, channeling public opinion to think that there is a type of mass mobilization within the evangelical field. Thus, it is thought that the masses of believers follow and act according to what the pastors ask for or carry out as representatives. In reality, what happens is that different political attitudes are constructed, which not only differ in certain elements but also become antagonistic.

This pluralism of political attitudes is also found in the conceptions that each believer has of the “Kingdom of God”. Although each signifies it in a different way, all embrace this theological figure as a narrative that characterizes their passage through life on earth in order to reach the hereafter. The Kingdom of God serves as a theological utopia that

leads to the longing for an ideal and just society, as a horizon to be headed towards. In this way, the present is understood as the place of concretion of social practices, giving meaning and direction to what is achieved. This leads them to become more deeply involved in the world, redefining the public space from different perspectives with the intention of becoming involved in society and no longer being separated from it. There is a vision of the believer to be light on earth; Christians have the responsibility to be linked in the public sphere, as Yadira, leader of ICM-C, says:

“I am part of a body, and that body has a responsibility: to take the gospel to all nations. This is a call to engage with society, family, and the nation, bringing the message of salvation while actively participating in society. It means being a part of society, occupying spaces where we can be a light without creating distance or barriers, but rather by being an active, contributing presence. In the political sphere, it is especially important that we take up these positions. The primary goal is to bring that light, that message, and to meet the need of individuals and families.” (Yadira, personal communication, 27 May 2019)

Thus, neo-Pentecostalism as a religious and political movement in Latin America is presented as a phenomenon that not only relocates the public sphere towards the private and the intimate community, but also projects and puts into play new concepts of citizenship, leadership, and political participation in the framework of these multiple modernities (Fediakova 2015; Reu 2019; Bianchi et al. 2016).

6. The Experience of the Holy Spirit

In addition to the political component, neo-Pentecostalism is a profoundly religious movement. In this sense, the churches analyzed in this study have a special emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, distinguishing them from the rest of the Christian denominations that do not experience or emphasize these charismatic gifts. Since this is a continuum of experiences that involves the senses and emotions through the body, these groups have focused more on this part of the religious experience and less on the intellectual and systematic part of theological knowledge. This does not mean that these groups lack a particular theology, but rather that they are the product of a combination of an emphasis on the experiential, inherited from classical Pentecostalism, and an attempt to articulate a hermeneutic and biblical study to support the actions they carry out.

We have seen that the great majority of these groups began from a supernatural experience of the founding leaders; therefore, although they have biblical institutes or leadership training schools, they do not address systematic theology or delve into the history of the Church from an integral perspective. Instead, they highlight the historical journey of their founders, such as John Wimber for the Vineyard churches or César Castellanos for those with the G12 model (ICM), because they consider that the important thing about biblical preparation is not the past but the present, the here and now (Ma 2007; Maçaneiro 2013; Lima et al. 2015).

For this reason, for authors such as Da Silva (2012), it is impossible to establish a theological current for neo-Pentecostalism since it is not absolutely evident in a single institution. However, we find in the Principle of Pentecostality, a category developed by the theologian Bernardo Campos (1997, 2016), a recognition of the experience of the Holy Spirit as the theological and symbolic axis articulating the Pentecostalism/charismatism/neo-Pentecostalism.

In classical Pentecostalism, speaking in tongues or glossolalia was the demonstration that the Spirit had baptized a person. Neo-Pentecostalism retains this emphasis but incorporates other manifestations that account for the action of the Spirit, such as healing, prophecy, and deliverance from demonic spirits, among others. Evidently, these expressions are not new; they have existed since the beginnings of Pentecostalism, but in neo-Pentecostal groups, they occupy a central place, acquiring greater protagonism and relevance:

“Entering the Kingdom of God also means receiving the Holy Spirit, it is being born again. The Holy Spirit is the one who opens our eyes to a reality where

Jesus reigns as King over all our lives, and indeed, over all humanity. To receive salvation is to experience everything Jesus promised. As He declared, 'The Holy Spirit is upon me to set captives free'. Receiving the Holy Spirit is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in a world dominated by the kingdom of darkness." (Abraham Perez, Pastor at Aliento de Vida Mexico, personal communication, 14 January 2020)

As we can see in the opinion of Pastor Abraham Perez, the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God is direct and profound. The various Christian traditions have associated the Holy Spirit with the symbols of the dove, fire, and oil, but how do believers relate to him? The Holy Spirit would be, first of all, God himself, but at the same time, the third person of the Trinity. This does not imply that he is the third in order of importance, but he is the third because he is the person of God that currently guides Christians. But he is also a person, not a breath, a wind, or a phantasmagoric entity, but a person who feels, who is sad, who laughs, who rejoices, and who becomes angry. Thus, believers need to build a personal relationship with him:

"The Holy Spirit can be your best friend. And I think they don't want to believe because he is confrontational, because a friend always tells you the truth even if it hurts you. While the Holy Spirit is your friend and He's tender and He's sweet, He's also Truth. And when he says things, he says them. And if you don't know Him you can become confused by that confrontation" (Jonathan, Cornerstone youth leader, personal communication, 3 November 2019).

To be a friend, the key is to "have an intimate relationship" with him to receive vision, direction, and guidance. Intimacy is achieved through prayer and fellowship with other Christians:

"Since I discovered that I can be who I am with the Holy Spirit, I said, "ah well I want an intimate relationship with you so I'm going to take you everywhere I go". We went to the movies, I bought him a ticket, we have been out for dinner and I have asked for a table for two even though people looked at me as if I was crazy, because it seemed like no one was occupying the other chair and me talking like I was alone, but no, I am not alone and never have been. Giving God his place, just as Marcos Brunet's song says, "Come and take your place", I opened my life to the Holy Spirit, I invited him to come into my daily life, to my house, to accompany me on the bus. Ah, because he is a gentleman, he will not enter without you inviting him to come in. My best moments have been with him. Once I went out with three of my disciples and we went to the movies, and I have programmed in my cell phone that a call comes in, it is the Holy Spirit calling me and so I start talking to him. So we were outside the movie theater, waiting to go in, and then my phone rang. It was a reminder that He was calling me. I passed the phone to Javi, my disciple, and told her, "It's the Holy Spirit". She answered, and I saw the surprised look on her face. As she answered, she began to be filled with the Spirit and started crying. We had to leave the area so we could minister to her because God had spoken to her" (Alejandra, home group leader, Personal communication, 7 December 2021).

With Alejandra's account, we observe a communion with the Spirit from the logic of the friend and of intimacy, since it allows people to be constantly living a spiritual atmosphere in any space where they are, taking the sacred aspects of religious practice to places such as the cinema or restaurants.

Other manifestations can occur when there is the movement of the Holy Spirit within a church and in the personal lives of believers. What is called charismata or charismatic gifts (McClung 1994; Nel 2017), which include healing, prophecy, tongues, and others, are received as tangible evidence of divine action. In addition to the gift of tongues, there are a number of "manifestations" of the Holy Spirit that occur at times of "overflow" but are not directly related to the gifts. These have been stigmatized on many occasions because they

are related to “heretical” experiences by representing unconventional body movements and expressions, which completely break with the solemnity, sobriety, and order of the worship. In addition, many detractors consider that since they are not clearly described in the Bible, they may be expressions that have more to do with demons than with the Holy Spirit. Some of the most recurrent manifestations are (1) convulsions; (2) holy laughter; (3) growling like an animal; (4) coughing up evil spirits; (5) fainting or falling backwards as if fainting; (6) golden frost; (7) uncontrollable crying; (8) sensation of fire in the body; (9) visions; (10) dancing; and (11) drunkenness of the spirit.

As we can see, the Holy Spirit plays a central role in Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism, since it is an energizing principle that permeates the entire religious experience, from preaching, miracles, healings, manifestations, intimacy, personal relationships, and the evangelizing mission.

All these experiences that involve the body and the mind make us see neo-Pentecostalism as a religious phenomenon that renews practices and elements of classical Pentecostalism in the midst of a context of modernized evangelical liturgy, with technology and audiovisual production that stimulates the senses and the mind, generating spaces of emotional ecstasy, in which the mind can connect with the corporeality and the spirit from a religious worldview with detonating symbols around the figure of the Holy Spirit and its power. This element can be understood from the collective feeling to understand the overexaltation of emotions in the midst of religious gatherings with shared codes (Parker 1993).

In this context, neo-Pentecostalism presents itself as a religious movement that reaffirms aspects of classical Pentecostalism while also integrating and reinterpreting new ways of ritualizing the relationship with the Holy Spirit. This is accompanied by symbolic practices that demonstrate the power of the Spirit through healing, deliverance, and the transformative action of the divine in people’s lives (Baer 2001; Ma 2007). All of this is framed within a dichotomous worldview, where the spiritual and earthly realms are seen as the battleground between God and the Devil for human souls (Oro 2018; Mariano 1999). This perspective forms part of the doctrine of spiritual warfare, which was inherited from fundamentalist movements of the nineteenth century, later adopted by Pentecostalism, and systematized by neo-Pentecostal and charismatic groups in the 1970s. This theological doctrine “presents a metaphysical understanding of social, economic and natural events” (Wynarczyk 1995, p. 153), where Satan’s actions must be identified and “bound”. According to Oro (2018), this doctrine represents a form of Holy War that transcends the spiritual realm and manifests in the material world across various aspects of social life, requiring believers to remain vigilant in resisting the “forces of evil”.

In some cases, the Holy Spirit is invoked not only as a personal guide but also a divine force in social and political struggles. Movements that view their battles against secular forces as part of a larger spiritual warfare see the Holy Spirit as actively leading believers in these efforts. This framing transforms the spiritual battle into a broader “Holy War” against moral decay, where the Holy Spirit is perceived as an essential ally in confronting issues that are seen as threats to the Christian worldview, such as “gender ideology” or movements advocating for LGBTIQ+ rights. By invoking the Holy Spirit in these contexts, Evangelicalism extends its theological influence into the political realm, presenting divine sanction for its sociopolitical stances (Aguilar 2019; Tec-López 2023; Bárcenas 2023).

This focus on the Holy Spirit is not limited to the political realm; it also plays a central role in personal spiritual experiences, shaping believers’ relationship with the divine. The Protestant Reformation implied the cessation of magic and miracle, replacing them with enlightened reason and the systematic study of the Bible. While it can be argued that certain Pentecostal practices may resemble magical traditions, Pentecostals themselves would frame their actions as faithful adherence to Biblical teachings, particularly through the ritual of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, with the gift of tongues as evidence and demonstration of the Spirit’s presence. In this sense, both the gift of tongues (glossolalia) and the manifestations of the Holy Spirit empower believers to overcome the barriers of secularizing modernity and re-enter the archetypal world, a “simultaneous retrocession and

progression that leads to the creation of the sphere where the pre-literal and the post-literal are united" (D. Martin 1990, p. 124).

However, this emphasis on religious experience does not exist in isolation. Neo-Pentecostalism's fusion of religious fervor with political engagement extends beyond the personal into the public sphere, where it often aligns itself with conservative political agendas, though not exclusively. While the trend leans toward conservative stances, neo-Pentecostal political involvement can vary depending on local contexts. This alignment raises critical questions about the instrumentalization of religious discourse in political processes, particularly in areas such as minority rights, gender, and sexual diversity (Ramos and Cabrera 2020). By seeking to influence legislation and public opinion, neo-Pentecostalism challenges the secular framework of modern states, complicating the relationship between church and state, and potentially threatening democratic pluralism.

7. Final Reflections

This article has explored how neo-Pentecostalism in Latin America operates at the intersection of religious fervor and political engagement, influencing both personal and public spheres—by focusing on the discourses of the Kingdom of God and the experiential dimensions of the Holy Spirit, we have examined how this movement navigates the complexities of modernity in Chile and Mexico. Our central research question was as follows: How do these elements influence the political and religious practices of neo-Pentecostal believers, and how do they shape the relationship between religion and politics in Latin America?

Our methodology combined participant observation, interviews, and documentary analysis within evangelical churches in Chile and Mexico. As discussed in the section on "Cartographies of Neo-Pentecostalism", the movement is not uniform across Latin America. It varies significantly depending on each country's historical, political, and cultural context. This diversity reflects the concept of multiple modernities, which recognizes that modernity is not a single, global phenomenon but manifests differently across various cultural and religious landscapes. In Latin America, modernity has not led to the decline of religion, but rather to a space where the sacred and the secular coexist and often overlap in tension.

The political engagement of neo-Pentecostals is best understood through the lens of the Kingdom of God, as explored in Section 5. This concept motivates believers to see their political involvement as part of a divine mission to expand God's rule on earth. Often forming alliances with neoliberal and hegemonic sectors, neo-Pentecostals work to advance conservative agendas, especially concerning human rights, gender, and sexual diversity. However, significant differences exist in how churches approach this political involvement. While some leaders encourage active participation in politics, others prefer to keep the pulpit free from political directives, reflecting the plurality of perspectives within the movement.

In the section on the experience of the Holy Spirit, we saw how this symbol plays a crucial role in shaping the personal and collective religious identity of the believers. Charismatic experiences—such as glossolalia, healing, and deliverance—reinforce theological beliefs while also providing a direct, tangible connection to the divine. The Holy Spirit is invoked not only as a personal guide but also as a divine force in social and political struggles. This demonstrates how neo-Pentecostalism integrates the experiential with the political, showing how personal spiritual practices can extend into public life, influencing even legislative agendas.

The neo-Pentecostal believer is a believer and a citizen at the same time; they often raise their hands to receive the Holy Spirit in the temple and raise them to rebuke the "demons" of homosexuality during marches against sexual rights. The neo-Pentecostal believer does not distinguish between the differentiated fields of modernity, but rather lives their faith in every area of daily life. They bring religious discourse into the public sphere, sacralize politics, and, at the same time, repoliticize the sacred.

Thus, we ask, does the Latin American believer, characterized by being both religious and modern, not embody two aspects of the same process? It is in this believer, and their

everyday practices—both religious and secular—that we can glimpse the intricate web of meanings that sustain and give continuity to what we understand as neo-Pentecostalism. Latin American believers favor a symbolic–emotive rationality where the body plays a crucial role, blurring the boundaries between different spheres of social reality. This is evident in neo-Pentecostal and Pentecostal rituals, Afro-American religions, neo-magical and neo-pagan expressions, esoteric spiritualities, and syncretic Catholic practices, all of which thrive on expressiveness, affection, and emotion (Parker 1993).

In this way, Pentecostal/charismatic/neo-Pentecostal practice reclaims the body as an essential substratum of life, integrating both body and mind through a magical–emotive rationality that departs from Western notions of reason. This logic permeates their religious experiences, intertwining them with their political and social actions (Parker 1993).

In conclusion, neo-Pentecostalism in Latin America presents a dynamic fusion of the religious and political, offering a complex response to modernity in the region. Through its emphasis on both the Kingdom of God and the Holy Spirit, neo-Pentecostalism challenges traditional distinctions between the sacred and the secular, reshaping the religious and political landscape in profound ways. This involvement in society and politics is not solely driven by theological interpretation, but also by broader social processes taking place in the world, particularly in Latin America. The way neo-Pentecostals influence the public sphere reflects the creation of new societal norms, with an emphasis on the ethical-moral factor, the resurgence of anti-left and anti-communist discourses, and the increasing role of religion in political decision-making, marking a significant transformation in the region's sociopolitical fabric.

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Notes

- ¹ These authors emphasize that using this typification requires prior argumentation and adaptation to the specific context being studied. Additionally, the main challenge with this classification is that its characteristics overlap with those of other typologies, creating a highly diffuse scenario where religious expressions from all three waves coexist: “The churches originating from these waves are now experiencing a form of coexistence in which the differences between them have become diluted and increasingly indistinct. First, second, and third-wave churches exchange experiences, liturgical practices, and doctrines, largely due to the advancement of media power. As a result, classifying them as isolated, self-contained groups is misleading” (Leite de Moraes 2010).
- ² In Western Europe, alongside secularization, there is not only religious indifference but also a growing diversity of religious expressions. New forms of religiosity have emerged, including influences from Asian religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as the increasing presence of Islam, which has significantly shaped the religious landscape (Davie 2015; Cesari 2014). This pluralization challenges the notion of a purely secular Europe and points to the need for further analysis of the interaction between traditional religious frameworks and these new religious movements.
- ³ The concept of “multiple modernities” is used here to highlight how modernity manifests differently in diverse cultural contexts. However, it is important to acknowledge that other frameworks, such as decoloniality, transmodernity, or enchanted modernity, can also be considered within this broader framework. In fact, when speaking of multiplicity, we can observe different processes and layers of modernity that coexist and interact. Decoloniality, for instance, provides a critical lens to examine the ongoing influences of colonial power dynamics (Mignolo 2011), while transmodernity opens up pathways for understanding new forms of global interconnectedness that transcend Eurocentric paradigms (Dussel 2002). These notions, rather than standing apart from the idea of multiple modernities, can be integrated as a part of the same broader discourse that acknowledges diverse experiences and articulations of modernity.

- ⁴ To investigate the specific characteristics of neo-Pentecostalism in Latin America, review the work of Tec-López (2020), which provides an overview of the main literature on this phenomenon in the region and highlights the various characterizations made by academic research.

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