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## Spirited competitors: an analysis of Pentecostal success in Latin America's new religious marketplace

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### ABSTRACT

The main objective of this article is to explore the reasons for Pentecostalism's unparalleled success in the region's free-market economy of faith. The roughly seventy-five million Latin American Pentecostals represent the same number of adherents as their chief competitors, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Through examination of the elements that determine the success or failure of any religious organization competing in an unregulated religious economy, Pentecostalism's recipe for success will become clear. Analyses of Pentecostal products, marketing, sales representatives, and consumers will illuminate the determining factors in this ecstatic religion's commanding position in the free religious market.

**Key words:** Protestantism. Pentecostalism. Religious Marketplace.

## Concorrentes cheios do espírito: uma análise do sucesso dos Pentecostais no novo mercado religioso da América Latina

### RESUMO

O objetivo principal deste artigo é discutir as razões do significativo sucesso do Pentecostalismo, em regiões com economias religiosas baseadas no livre mercado da fé. Os aproximadamente 75 milhões de pentecostais latino-americanos representam o mesmo número de fiéis de seu maior concorrente, a Renovação Carismática Católica. Através da análise dos elementos que determinam o sucesso ou insucesso de organizações religiosas competindo numa economia religiosa não regulada, explicaremos a receita de sucesso dos pentecostais. Examinando os produtos, estratégias de proselitismo e de publicidade dos pentecostais, além do perfil dos consumidores, desvendamos aqui os fatores determinantes da posição hegemônica ocupada por essa religião de êxtase no livre mercado religioso.

**Palavras-Chave:** Protestantismo. Pentecostalismo. Mercado Religioso.

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As the premier non-Catholic religion of Latin America, Pentecostalism has been the primary religious architect and developer of the region's new free market of faith. If the region's popular consumers are now free to choose to consume the religious goods that best satisfy their spiritual and material desires, it is largely due to the unparalleled growth of Pentecostal churches since the 1950s. This charismatic branch of Protestantism single-handedly created religious and social space where Latin Americans from the popular classes are free not to be Catholic. Given Catholicism's historical role as one the constituent elements of Latin American national identities, Pentecostalism's construction of an alternative religious identity for those dissatisfied with their inherited faith is no minor achievement. For more than four centuries to be Brazilian or Mexican, for example, was to be Catholic. The tiny minorities who began to convert to historic Protestant denominations, such as Methodism and Presbyterianism, in the latter half of the nineteenth century and then to the faith missions around the turn of the century risked social ostracism and sometimes even violence at the hands of Catholics who viewed Protestant converts as traitorous to the One True Faith, if not the nation itself. Not surprisingly, Protestant converts during this period tended to be those Latin American men and women who had the least religious, social, political, and financial capital to lose in abandoning their native religion. Very rarely did members of the privileged classes shed their Catholic identities.

That not more than 1 percent of Latin Americans identified themselves as Protestant as late as 1940 is evidence of the failure of historic Protestantism and the numerous faith missions to attract a critical mass of converts. Since Pentecostal churches currently account for approximately 75 percent of all Latin American Protestants after almost a century of evangelization, the obvious conclusion is that Pentecostalism's predecessors did not offer attractive religious goods and services to popular religious consumers. If the social cost of renouncing Catholicism had been the only factor impeding conversion to Protestantism, the historic churches and faith missions would be thriving at present, now that there is much less social stigma attached to shedding one's Catholic identity. However, the only historic churches able to effectively compete with the Pentecostals are those that have embraced spirit-filled worship and Pentecostalized. In Brazil these schismatic churches generally maintain their denominational title but distinguish themselves from their non-charismatic brethren by adding the term "renewed" (*renovada*) to their name.

The main objective of this article is to explore the reasons for Pentecostalism's unparalleled success in the

region's free-market economy of faith. The roughly seventy-five million Latin American Pentecostals represent the same number of adherents as their chief competitors, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Through examination of the elements that determine the success or failure of any religious organization competing in an unregulated religious economy, Pentecostalism's recipe for success will become clear. Analyses of Pentecostal products, marketing, sales representatives, and consumers will illuminate the determining factors in this ecstatic religion's commanding position in the free religious market.

#### MARIA DA SILVA: AN ARCHETYPICAL CONSUMER

Since it is the tastes and preferences of religious consumers that largely determine the fate of any given religious enterprise in a competitive economy, consideration of the large class of popular religious consumers who have purchased the Pentecostal product is imperative. In other words, who are these millions of Brazilians, Paraguayans, Peruvians and Guatemalans, among others, who have converted to Pentecostalism since it first sunk roots in Latin American soil in the initial decades of the twentieth century? Sufficient research on Ibero-American Pentecostalism has been conducted over the past decade to allow for a fairly accurate socioeconomic profile of believers.

The archetypal Latin American Pentecostal is Maria da Silva, a poor, married woman of color in her thirties or forties living on the urban periphery. She works as a domestic servant in the home of a privileged compatriot and was a nominal Catholic before converting to the Assembly of God during a time of personal crisis related to her experience of material deprivation. Of course charismatic Protestantism is so widespread and differentiated now that there are hundreds of thousands of believers who possess none of these constituent elements of the Pentecostal archetype. For example, many of the members of the NeoPentecostal denominations in Guatemala such as Shaddai and El Verbo are upper-middle class, professional men. Nonetheless, Maria da Silva personifies the most common socioeconomic traits found among the vast population of believers.

Most salient among the socioeconomic characteristics of Latin American *crentes* (or believers as they are often called in Brazil) are poverty, a nominal Catholic background and gender. Historically, the great majority of Pentecostal converts have been poor non-practicing Catholics. Numerous studies, including my own in Brazil, have shown that not only are Latin American Pente-

costs poor, but that they tend to have lower incomes and less education than the general population. The largest study ever conducted of Latin American Protestantism, the 1996 ISER (Instituto Superior da Religião) survey of the Protestant population of Rio de Janeiro found *crentes* to be considerably more likely to live in poverty and have less schooling than the *carioca* population at large<sup>1</sup>. Although Pentecostalism has ascended the region's socioeconomic pyramid, particularly since the 1980s, it continues to be predominantly a religion of the popular classes.

In addition to social class, most Latin American Pentecostals share a common former religious identity. The majority of *creyentes* had been nominal or cultural Catholics before converting (MIGUEZ, 1999). Most would have been baptized in the Catholic church and perhaps had even taken first communion, but their contact with the institutional church was minimal. However, their weak or non-existent ties to the *ecclesia* in no way meant that their worldview had become secularized or disenchanting. In times of both need and celebration, nominal Catholics, like their practicing coreligionists, would send prayers of supplication or thanksgiving to the Virgin or one of the myriad saints. Thus, due to their estrangement from the church and perennial shortage of clergy, no priest or pastoral agent would likely be present at the time of their poverty-related crisis, which so often leads afflicted individuals to the doors of a Pentecostal temple. It is among this vast field of nominal Catholics, who compose the majority of the Ibero-American population, that Pentecostal evangelists have reaped such bountiful harvests of converts.

While the third salient characteristic of the Pentecostal consumer market, the great female majority among believers, is not peculiar to the faith, it merits discussion due to the religion's status as the most widely practiced faith among women of the popular classes. Pentecostalism holds extraordinary appeal among impoverished Latin American women. Hence, product development and marketing strategies naturally must take into account the fact that women believers outnumber men by a ratio of two to one. In one of Brazil's largest and fastest growing Pentecostal denominations, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD), the ratio climbs to four to one. Male believers, of course, continue to monopolize the pastorate and high-ranking church offices, but Pentecostalism is largely sustained and spread by sisters in the faith.

## PRACTICAL PRODUCTS

The above profile of Pentecostal consumers allows for a better understanding of the religious products that believers are purchasing and consuming in *crente* churches and in their daily lives. Defining religious products as the doctrine and worship services of faith-based organizations, this section of the chapter considers the spiritual goods and services that have resulted in Pentecostalism's unmatched success in the free market of faith. Thus, the task at hand is not to identify every single Pentecostal product but to examine those whose popularity among consumers has led to pneumatocentric Protestantism's dramatic expansion in Latin America since the 1950s.

The utilitarian nature of Pentecostalism and popular religion in general means that the spiritual products offered to consumers of the divine must prove useful in their daily lives. Products that do not relate to believers' quotidian existence will find few purchasers in the popular religious marketplace. This does mean that popular consumers are only religious instrumentalists who evaluate spiritual products solely on the basis of their capacity to provide relief from the afflictions of everyday poverty. However, since the relation between religion and society is dialectical, spiritual products that hold little relevance to the social reality of impoverished believers will collect dust on the lower shelves of the market. If Pentecostalism is thriving in the Latin American marketplace, it is largely due to the utility of its products in consumers' everyday lives.

Since most Latin American religious consumers are much better acquainted with Catholic products, rival spiritual firms, in order to compete, must offer goods that are simultaneously familiar and novel. That is, the non-Catholic product must provide sufficient continuity with Catholic doctrine or worship to maintain the potential consumer's comfort level. Yet, at the same time the product must offer novelty that piques consumer interest enough to draw them away from the Catholic product. Pentecostalism possesses exactly this type of product in its doctrine and practice of faith healing. More than any other of its line of products, it is the Pentecostal belief that Jesus and the Holy Spirit have the power to cure believers of their spiritual, somatic, and psychological ills that impels more Latin Americans to affiliate with *crente* churches. All Catholics, whether practicing or nominal, are familiar, if not experienced, with the healing powers of the saints and Virgin. In fact, it is their status as powerful agents of divine healing that

<sup>1</sup> The ISER survey included mainline Protestants whose higher income and educational levels raised the mean. If only Pentecostals had been surveyed the gap between believers and the general population would have been substantially larger (FERNANDES, 1998).

has won such world renown for Virgins such as Guadalupe, Lourdes, and Aparecida.

Pentecostal faith healing thus is really not a new product per se but a greatly improved one. With the great exception of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, divine healing has existed on the fringes of the twentieth-century Ibero-American Catholic church. The curing of all types of ailments through promises and petitions to the Virgin and saints has customarily taken place beyond the pale of the institutional church, and if any human mediators were involved at all, they were more likely to be *curanderas* (folk healers) than priests. In striking contrast, Pentecostal preachers, from the earliest days made *cura divina* a centerpiece of both doctrine and practice. Indeed, it was an act of faith healing in 1911 that led to the birth of the Western Hemisphere's largest Pentecostal denomination, the Brazilian Assembly of God (CHESNUT, 1997). Whereas Catholic Masses offered little liturgical space for the healing of believers' quotidian afflictions, Pentecostal worship services and revivals in which Jesus or the Holy Spirit would fail to operate through the congregation to cure worshipers of their illnesses are almost unimaginable. Of such importance is faith healing to the mission of the Brazilian Universal Church of the Kingdom of God that two days of its weekly schedule of services are devoted to it. Hence, Latin American Pentecostalism took what had been a marginal product in institutional Catholicism and turned it into the sine qua non of its own religious production.

If the product of faith healing, more than any other, induces religious consumers to join the Pentecostal enterprise, it is another good that facilitates the recovery and maintenance of believers' health over the long term. The doctrine of conversion in which joining a Pentecostal church is conceptualized as part of a process of spiritual rebirth allows the believer to be born again into a healthy new environment where the demons of poverty can be neutralized. Conceived of as a "positive transformation of the nature and value of a person," religious conversion appeals most to those individuals and groups who have been stigmatized or negatively evaluated by society (STARK; BAINBRIDGE, 1987). A conversionist religion then which offers the possibility of a new life far removed from the afflictions of the old would be understandably popular among those millions of Latin Americans seeking to turn away from family conflict, alcoholism and illness.

Pentecostalism's final salient product, ecstatic power, is one that it shares with its main religious rivals but possesses in greater measure than African diasporan faiths and Charismatic Catholicism. Just as the dialectic between illness and faith healing attracts millions of converts, a

similar one between socioeconomic impotence and spiritual power appeals to many impoverished Latin Americans. With direct access to the Holy Spirit through Baptism in the Spirit and charismata, such as glossolalia and prophecy, economically impotent Pentecostals experience intense spiritual power. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, poor believers are fortified to do battle with the demons of deprivation, which can make life on the urban and rural margins seem hellish at times.

#### A FAITH IN MARKETING

As any business student knows, it is not sufficient for a firm to simply possess an appealing product. In modern consumer societies where prospective customers are presented with a dizzying array of goods and services, businesses must aggressively market their product, attempting to pierce the cacophony of omnipresent advertising and deliver their message to consumers. So important is marketing, particularly in affluent consumer societies such as the U.S., that the way in which a particular product is packaged and advertised often has greater bearing on its sales than the actual qualities of the product itself.

Admittedly, the science of marketing is not as developed in religious economies as commercial ones but without a successful strategy of evangelization that offers doctrine and worship directly to prospective believers, spiritual firms operating in a free market of faith will find it hard to compete with their rivals who actively and creatively evangelize. And in the religious economies of present day Ibero-America no religion has evangelized as successfully as Pentecostalism. If pneumatic Protestantism has been able to convert millions of nominal Catholics and claim at least three-quarters of the region's total Protestant population in less than a century, it is in no small measure due to Pentecostal marketing of the faith. This section, then, considers the ways in which the Assemblies of God, Foursquare Gospel Church and other Pentecostal denominations have successfully delivered their religious products to spiritual consumers through advertising and packaging. In the Evangelical idiom, what follows is examination of the methods of evangelization that have won myriad souls for Jesus.

Like their Pentecostal brethren in the U.S., Latin American *crentes* are the most skilled marketers in the region's new religious economy. They have utilized diverse media to deliver the simple but potent message to prospective converts that affiliation with Pentecostalism will imbue them with sufficient supernatural strength to vanquish the demons of poverty. It is the dynamic and

controversial Universal Church of the Kingdom of God that has captured the essence of Pentecostal advertising in its evangelistic slogan, "stop suffering." The pithy phrase "*pare de sofrer*," typically printed in bright red letters, calls out to the afflicted poor of Brazil from the church walls, pamphlets and newspapers of this innovative denomination. A combination of low and high-tech media invite religious consumers, mainly nominal Catholics, to relieve their suffering by embracing Jesus and the Holy Spirit specifically within the walls of the particular church that is advertising its product.

One of the most effective means of marketing the Pentecostal product is the oldest method of *creyente* evangelization in Latin America, home visits. The founders of the Assembly of God in Brazil, Swedish-American immigrants, Gunnar Vingren and Daniel Berg proselytized in early twentieth-century Belem through visits to victims of a yellow fever epidemic and other maladies (*Ibid.*). Since then, hundreds of thousands of Pentecostal pastors and lay persons have knocked on flimsy doors throughout Latin America's urban periphery and countryside to spread the good news of healing to those suffering from poverty-related afflictions. In the Assemblies of God, lay women evangelists, called *visitadoras* (visitors) proselytize not only door to door but also in hospitals filled with those who are especially predisposed to accept a dose of divine healing.

For those Ibero-Americans who do not come into contact with Pentecostalism through low-tech marketing, evangelists have made it hard to avoid exposure to their product through its advertisement in the mass media of radio, television, and even the internet. Despite the rapid growth of Pentecostal televangelism in the region since the early 1980s, it is the oldest form of electronic media, radio, that continues to account for the bulk of *crente* broadcasting. Whereas even Pentecostal-owned television stations, such as the IURD's Rede Record, transmit mostly commercial programs, many radio stations broadcast nothing but Pentecostal preaching, music and conversion testimonials twenty-four hours a day.

Radio's advantage over television as a marketing tool for the Pentecostal product is twofold. First and foremost it is significantly cheaper than television. Only the largest denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, IURD and Foursquare Gospel Church can afford the high costs associated with proprietorship of a station or production of programs. In contrast, some smaller churches that could never dream of appearing on television possess

the funds to purchase small amounts of air time, particularly on the AM band of the close to one thousand stations in Latin America that carry Protestant programming (MORENO, 1999). Second, while TV antennae have become a permanent fixture on the skyline of the urban periphery, radio is still more ubiquitous among the Latin American popular classes.

Following in the footsteps of their North American brethren who dominate religious broadcasting in the U.S., a few large Pentecostal denominations enjoy a commanding position in the transmission of spiritual programs. With the exception of the pioneering but short-lived programs of the nationalistic Brazil for Christ denomination in the 1960s and the Universal Church in the early 1980s, Latin American owned and produced Pentecostal television did not take root until the late 1980s. Since the early part of the decade, U.S. televangelists, such as Assembly of God members Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker had dominated Protestant broadcasting in Latin America. Given the superior resources of the North American televangelists, it was only natural that they serve as the trailblazers in Latin American Pentecostal television.

However, by the end of the decade a few major *crente* churches, particularly in Brazil, such as the Assemblies of God, Foursquare Gospel, IURD and International Church of the Grace of God (Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus) were producing their own programs, and in the case of the IURD, purchasing its own station. In November of 1989, the Universal Church made Latin American history in buying the Rede Record television and radio stations for US\$ 45 million. With Record owned by the IURD and Rede Globo, Latin America's largest broadcasting corporation, by the staunch Catholic impresario, Roberto Marinho, the battle for Christian market share has erupted on to the small screens of Brazil. Both networks have aired *novelas* (evening soap operas) satirizing and even demonizing each other. And Padre Marcelo, the dashing young star of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, has appeared on numerous occasions in the late 1990s on Rede Globo's variety and talk shows.

Ever seeking a novel way to sell their product, large Latin American Pentecostal churches have joined the revolution in information technology and have developed websites on the internet<sup>2</sup>. The IURD website even has its own chatroom in which members and the curious can discuss matters of faith in "real time." The small

<sup>2</sup> A search in August 2007 found the following churches to be running their own websites: the IURD, the Assemblies of God in Brazil, Luz del Mundo-Mexico (Light of the World), Deus e Amor-Brazil (God is Love), Iglesia del Evangelio Cuadrangular-Chile (Foursquare Gospel Church), El Shaddai-Guatemala, and Iglesia Cristiana Verbo-Guatemala (Church of the Word).



but increasing minority of Latin American believers who have internet access can take pride in the fact that their denominations have embraced the latest mass medium as a novel way to market their religious product to those in need of healing.

The Pentecostal product sold in the mass media is most appealing when sold in the packages of testimonials, music, and exorcism. Whether on television, radio or at rallies in soccer stadiums, the conversion narrative of a Pentecostal convert is often a powerfully emotive account of how Jesus or the Holy Spirit restored the believer's health or saved her from one of the demons of deprivation. Listeners and viewers experiencing their own crisis hear and see how someone from the same or similar social class dramatically turned his life around through acceptance of Jesus and affiliation with the church broadcasting the program. Such advertising, of course, is ubiquitous among commercial firms. Dramatic before and after photos, along with testimony, of consumers who supposedly used a particular diet product invite obese Latin and North Americans to remake themselves as slim and fit men and women.

Pentecostal sales representatives also package their product in the emotional form of music. Romantic ballads, pop songs and regional rhythms all set to evangelical lyrics blare from Pentecostal radio and television stations, in addition to worship services. The most musical of all the major branches of Christianity, Pentecostalism rouses its believers and attracts new converts through its melodic electric guitars, drums, tambourines, and synthesizers. Whether it is background mood music or moving hymns, melodic rhythms constitute such an integral part of *crente* worship services that in Brazil they are sung and played during at least two-thirds of the typically two-hour long service.

#### ANIMATED AMATEURS

The successful marketing of a product depends in large part on the skill and zeal of a firm's sales representatives. Without a motivated corps of salespersons who believe in the goods and services they are selling, even the most appealing product, whether spiritual or temporal, will often prove a difficult sell. And it is here again that Pentecostalism has developed a great advantage over its religious competitors. *Creyente* sales specialists are not well educated like their Catholic and mainline Protestant rivals but have proven themselves to be superior vendors of religious goods and services for several reasons.

Perhaps of greatest importance is that each believer, whether clergy or laity, is a potential sales representative

for his or her church. Contrariwise, it is only with the development of the Charismatic Renewal in the 1980s that the Latin American Catholic church started to send lay missionaries to evangelize nominal Catholics door to door. Until then what little proselytizing took place was carried out by priests. Conversely, for most of the nearly a century that Pentecostalism has been operating in the region, it is zealous lay evangelists who have done most of the knocking on the doors of Latin American homes. And when not making home visits, lay members sell the Pentecostal product very successfully to their family members, co-workers and friends. Indeed, as has previously been mentioned, the majority of converts first come into contact with the faith along such interpersonal networks.

If it were not enough to be able to rely on a force of dedicated amateurs to do most of the selling, Pentecostalism also excels at marketing because of the entrepreneurial skills and evangelical zeal of its professional sales representatives, the pastorate. Besides outnumbering their mainline Protestant and Catholic cohorts, *creyente* pastors enjoy several distinct advantages over their religious rivals. First, as ironic as it may seem, Pentecostal pastors are more likely to share the common elements of nationality and social class with prospective converts than Catholic clergy do with theirs. Surprisingly, in a region that is putatively the most Catholic in the world, in most countries the majority of the priests are foreign. Leading the region is the most Pentecostal nation, Guatemala, where in the early 1980s, an astounding 87 percent of the clergy were foreign born, especially in Spain. Bolivia, Mexico, Honduras and Venezuela follow as nations in which more than two-thirds of the priests were foreigners (BARRET, 1982). In diametrical opposition, the great majority of the Pentecostal pastorate in every Latin American country is native born. Other factors being equal, religious consumers are more likely to purchase products sold by compatriots who speak their same language fluently and share their same national culture. Paradoxically, a religion that less than a century ago was brought to the region by foreign missionaries is now more authentically Latin American, at least in terms of its clergy, than the faith that has had half a millennium to sink its roots from Chile to Mexico.

Compatriotism, however, is not the only competitive advantage possessed by professional Pentecostal sales representatives. That *crente* pastors normally belong to the same socioeconomic class as those they seek to convert also makes for easier sale of Pentecostal products. Not only does nationality distance the majority of Catholic clergy from prospective practitioners but so do their educational levels. Years of seminary training place pri-

ests among the educational elite of Latin America. Even if they came from humble origins, they have acquired considerable sacred and secular knowledge through higher education and no longer speak the language of the unlettered *pueblo*. Hence, the gap between the highly educated foreign priest and the potential parishioner with no more than an elementary school education makes for a harder sell of the Catholic product.

In contradistinction, the professional Pentecostal salesman is not only a fellow Mexican, for example, but also an individual who had to quit school in the sixth grade to work to help support his family. He makes his sales pitch in the same colorful and often ungrammatical Spanish spoken by his prospective consumers, who will recognize him as both a *paisano* (compatriot) and a *car-nal* (a term employed by the Mexican popular classes that roughly translates into the U.S. slang of "blood" or "brother"). Marketed in the popular idiom of the Latin American *pueblo*, the Pentecostal product proves a much easier sell than religious goods and services offered in sophisticated and often foreign-accented Spanish and Portuguese.

If at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Latin American Christianity has Pentecostalized to the extent that the Catholic church's most dynamic movement is its own version of Pentecostalism, it is because charismatic Protestantism has developed superior religious products and marketed them more successfully than its competitors in the free market of faith. Unlike Catholicism, which enjoyed a four-century plus monopoly on religious production, Pentecostalism if it were to expand in the region had to compete for religious consumers. Thus from its

arrival in the first decades of the twentieth century if it were going to survive at first and then grow, it had to convince Catholics, predominantly nominal ones, that Pentecostal products are superior. And this it has done with such success that on this past Sunday there were more *crentes* worshiping in their churches than Catholics at Mass in Brazil, the largest "Catholic nation" on earth.

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