

Michael Vollmann: The Pentecostal Movement in Brazil. Liberation of the Poor or Commercial Sham?

Pentecostal movements, which highlight the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian as exemplified by the pentecostal event, are gaining ground all over the world. Brazil, the biggest Catholic country in the world, is particularly affected by it: This country is home to the greatest variety of Pentecostal Christian denominations, whose followers are estimated to number more than half a billion worldwide. According to national counts, 17.7 million Brazilians, i.e. more than ten percent of the population of a country where the number of Catholics is declining swiftly anyhow, today identify themselves as followers of the Pentecostal creed. But who are the Pentecostals and where do they come from?

As its strongholds are in urban and suburban regions as well as in the north and the central eastern region of Brazil, the Pentecostal movement has taken hold of those parts of the Brazilian population that are in a precarious economic situation or have a propensity towards migration. When, at the beginning of the 20th century, the first Pentecostals settled down in this South American country, the predominance of the Catholic church had already been broken: One hundred years before, missionary Protestant churches such as the Baptists and Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists had arrived in Brazil and prepared a ground across which Pentecostalism spread in three missionary waves.

When the Congregação Cristão do Brasil, which today has 2.5 million followers, was founded in São Paulo in 1910, the first wave of 'classical Pentecostalism' had arrived in Brazil. One year later, the Assambléia de Deus was founded in Belém, its membership amounting to 8.5 million today. The second wave came in 1950, leading to the foundation of the Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular. Finally, the third wave of 1970 produced the neo-Pentecostal secular and prosperity-oriented movement which today has eight million followers. It increasingly makes use of the mass media, and the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus is its representation. It is not least because of its genesis that Brazilian Pentecostalism, which according to official counts comprises 15 different pentecostal religions, is highly fragmented today.

Defined as a current within the Christian church and assigned to the Protestants in Latin America, the main feature of the Pentecostal movement is its belief in the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christians. In general, two types of movements may be distinguished: 'Classical Pentecostalism' which was based on the ideas of William J. Seymour, a Black preacher, and originated in Los Angeles, is rooted in a spirituality which includes ecstatic experiences such as the consolamentum and glossolalia. It is distinguished by strict morality, its call for asceticism, and a conservative-liberal attitude in political and social questions. 'Neo-Pentecostalism', on the other hand, projects what is holy not through the Bible but through symbols such as anointing, the laying on of hands, and exorcism. It regards the consolamentum not as much as a religious experience as the mercy of divine healing. The neo-Pentecostals who, compared to the Catholic church, for example, are very aggressive in wooing new members, ascribe special importance to popular religiosity. Other characteristics of neo-Pentecostalism are material prosperity and a clear orientation towards the secular world. Not very different from the medieval trade in indulgences which was practised in Europe, neo-Pentecostalism relates the chances of salvation and redemption to the amount of donations made by an individual.

Competition on the market of religions is fierce as the number of neo-Pentecostal churches with their generally hierarchical corporate structure is growing quickly. As the believers' bond with their community is normally weak and their fluctuation is great, individuals become 'customers' of the 'purveyor of religion', compiling the 'service package' they want to suit their taste – social

standing, skin colour, financial power etc. All this shows that 'the Pentecostal movement' is anything but a homogeneous phenomenon; rather, it is composed of different, sometimes even antagonistic currents.

Still, the success of the Pentecostals in Brazil is clearly visible; but what are the reasons for it? On the one hand, it may be said that neither Catholicism nor – historical – Protestantism gave the desired answer to the population's openness towards spontaneous forms of religiosity and spirituality. What also remained unsatisfied is the desire for religious mysticism prevailing among the poorest population strata. While the Catholic church at least endeavours to counteract the shift towards Pentecostalism by showing more tolerance, the Protestant church still finds it difficult to deal with new forms of ethics. Moreover, the attraction of the Pentecostal churches was enhanced by the fact that Catholicism lacked a certain open-mindedness towards the social situation of the working classes in the 20th century, and that it did not have its own Brazilian labour movement during the time of the authoritarian 'Estado Novo'. Finally, other factors that provided equally positive impulses for the growth of the Pentecostal community in more recent times include a general aggravation of the social and economic situation as a result of globalisation, increasing violence, more unemployment, and the fact that the Catholic church did not appreciate the theology of liberation and thus did not invest in it.

Until 1988, most Pentecostals were apolitical without any legal obligation. After the military dictatorship, they succeeded in sending 20 delegates to the constituent assembly. Together with like-minded members of their Protestant party they successfully initiated the abolition of Catholicism as state religion, thereby establishing equality between Pentecostalism and the Catholic church.

Today, the leading Pentecostal churches own a great number of television and radio stations, internet portals, and publishing houses for print media. Due to their good infrastructure and numerous voluntary helpers, but also to the pro-Protestant overtones that many politicians transport through the media, Pentecostal churches are able to reach an enormous number of potential voters. With 62 MPs only five years ago, the Protestant party systematically expanded its influence from 1988 onwards, founding the *bancada evangélica* in 2003. As the *bancada* showed no ideological or political unity, and since many of its deputies were embroiled in corruption scandals, its backing melted again so that it is down to 29 members today.

The current image of the Pentecostals among the population is divided. It is not necessarily an advantage for a politician to have an 'evangelical image', as the series of bad headlines about some of the Pentecostal churches – which speak of manipulation, charlatanism, and usury – do not exactly help to increase the population's trust in them.

In Brazil's political culture, there certainly is some amount of religious clientelism and vote catching. However, it must be said that first, the country's political-party system is fragile, which is the reason why candidates change their party allegiance so frequently, and second, that the Pentecostals' success has certainly not eliminated any of the practices of democratic participation that existed before.

In Brazil, religious clientelism is not necessarily worse than political clientelism. Moreover, the Pentecostal message may raise hopes, promote integration and inhibit violence. The fact is that in elections, the Pentecostals have by now become a factor in the country which can no longer be ignored but has not changed the political practice in any way. Another fact is, however, that Brazil would acquire an increasingly Pentecostal character and a clearly more conservative face if Pentecostalism continued to spread as quickly as it is doing now.

