

Social Forms in Neo-Pentecostal Prosperity Contexts

From Network to Market Exchange

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Abstract *This chapter discusses the various social forms that play a role in prosperity contexts, a diverse yet distinct strain within neo-Pentecostalism whose adherents believe that God will reward them with health and wealth in return for generous gifts to their churches and other financial investments. The contribution focuses on group, event, organization, network, movement, and market exchange as the social forms through which individuals and groups coordinate their religious interaction and practice, and highlights market exchange as a particularly salient form due to its congruence with prosperity semantics. Prosperity theologies teach that investment not only in one's personal faith and one's congregation, but also, and importantly, on the secular market, will be rewarded by God, and these semantics are mirrored on a structural level by the market exchange as a form of transaction between two parties. Given the fact that financial risk-taking and success on the secular market are coded religiously as signs of depth of faith and divine grace, the market exchange complements these core tenets by translating semantics into structure, as it were.*

Keywords *group, market exchange, neo-Pentecostalism, network, organization, prosperity ethic, prosperity gospel, prosperity theologies*

1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on what has been called the prosperity gospel, prosperity theologies, or, more recently, the prosperity ethic, a diverse yet distinct strain within neo-Pentecostalism whose adherents believe that God will reward them with health and wealth in return for generous gifts to their churches and other

financial investments (Attanasi 2016). Prosperity teachings have spread at an astounding pace in recent years, particularly in the Global South, where Pentecostalism continues to gain adherents in large numbers (Attanasi/Yong 2016). While a host of literature exists on the popularity and rapid dissemination of prosperity theologies (cf. below), little attention has been paid to how the content of these theologies might affect the ways in which believers come together to practice their faith – how they structure and coordinate religious interaction. It is the aim of this chapter to shed light on various social forms that play a role in neo-Pentecostal prosperity contexts; it is thus primarily a theoretical contribution, less an empirical one. To this end, it will draw from existing literature and use selected empirical examples to illustrate its theoretical arguments.

The chapter consists of four sections: The remainder of this introduction (1) will locate neo-Pentecostal prosperity teachings within the broader Pentecostal-Charismatic landscape as a general orientation for readers unfamiliar with this Christian tradition. Following a brief summary of the history and main tenets of prosperity teachings in section 2, which serves to sketch the most important religious semantics in the field, section 3 shifts the focus to religious structure and discusses a variety of social forms that are evident in prosperity contexts. It focuses on group, event, organization, network, movement, and market exchange as the main forms by way of which individuals and groups coordinate their religious interaction and practice, and highlights market exchange as a particularly salient social form due to its congruence with prosperity semantics. The chapter closes with some concluding reflections.

Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, an experiential strain that emphasizes the “gifts” of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing, is the fastest-growing Christian current worldwide (Miller et al. 2013). With its ability to adapt to local contexts, absorbing instead of disregarding existing religious worldviews and ‘translating’ its core tenets to meet a range of cultural expectations, it has successfully spread around the globe and particularly taken root in the Global South (Afolayan et al. 2018; Robbins 2004). Observers generally distinguish three phases in the history of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity: (1.) ‘Classical’ Pentecostalism, which emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in different parts of the world, including in the United States in the context of the Asuza Street Revival (1906–1915) in Los Angeles; (2.) Charismatic Renewal movements, especially but not exclusively in the Roman Catholic Church, which gained momentum through contacts with Pentecostalism since the 1960s; and (3.) neo-Pentecostalism (or neo-Charis-

matic Christianity), a ‘softer’ reinterpretation of classical Pentecostalism that emerged starting in the 1980s and emphasizes healing and self-empowerment (Bowler 2013; Hunt 2002).

There are a number of different statistics and reports on how many people identify as Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians; a rough consensus seems to be that at least 500 million people worldwide exhibit some degree of self-identification with this broad tradition. The World Christian Encyclopedia’s third edition counts 644 million members globally: 230 million in Africa, 195 million in Latin America, 125 million in Asia, 68 million in North America, 21 million in Europe, and 4.5 million in Australia and Oceania (Johnson/Zurlo 2020); other general sources count e.g. 450 million Pentecostals and Charismatics worldwide plus an additional 200 million Christians strongly influenced by Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, including Evangelicals with a focus on the Holy Spirit (Jacobsen 2021). In her extensive study on the Prosperity Gospel in the United States, Kate Bowler reports that 17% of all US Christians identify with prosperity teachings, while 31% believe that God increases the wealth of those who give (2013, 6).

Clearly, thus, Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is an influential tradition in the Americas and, to a lesser extent, in Europe, and prosperity teachings play an increasingly large role in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and beyond. Because the prosperity gospel originated in the United States and has become similarly popular in Latin America in recent decades, the empirical examples this chapter draws from are largely located in the Americas, also to match the present volume’s geographical focus. The following section offers a brief overview of the history and main tenets of prosperity theologies before we turn to our discussion of social forms in neo-Pentecostal prosperity contexts in the remainder of the chapter.

2. Neo-Pentecostal prosperity teachings

At the heart of prosperity teachings lies the conviction that God will reward believers with health and wealth for generous gifts to their churches and for a variety of other monetary and spiritual investments. Adherents are taught to expect multiple returns on what they give: material wealth, physical and emotional health, and a generally prosperous, “abundant” life. For this reason, prosperity theologies are often called the “health and wealth gospel”, although observers have long since emphasized the heterogeneous nature of prosper-

ity teachings around the globe (Coleman 2017; Hunt 2002). Coleman suggests thinking of “Prosperity discourse as manifested less in a single Gospel per se, and more in a set of ethical practices that can be combined and reconstituted in very different cultural contexts, and which may in fact work through ambiguity and play as much as through the expression of apparently firm and exclusive religious convictions” (2016, 276–277). Very generally, he argues, “prosperity orientation is constituted by ritual activity that establishes links between forms of giving and the creation of value” (Coleman 2017, 62–63). In the prosperity framework, the believer becomes an investor with the goal not only of spiritual salvation but of access to the secular market as a sign of this-worldly divine election. As elaborated below, economic risk-taking is increasingly coded as conviction of God’s power to change adherents’ lives for the better, while success in the marketplace translates into an indicator of divine grace. The following overview of the origins and development of global prosperity theologies takes these assumptions as a point of departure to emphasize their wide variety at the same time as stressing core commonalities in order to focus, in the following section, on the various social forms, particularly the market exchange, that emerge in neo-Pentecostal prosperity contexts.

Prosperity theologies also run under the heading of “Word of Faith”, the name of a Pentecostal current that was coined by American evangelist Kenneth Hagin (Coleman 2016, 279). According to Harrison, Word of Faith consists of three core elements: Believers must (1) learn “who they are in Christ” and (2) practice “positive confession” to (3) be rewarded with prosperity, divine health, and material wealth (2005, 8–12). They are taught that because the Bible promises a life of “abundance” for the faithful – “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7); “Give and it will be given unto you” (Luke 6:38); “My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches of glory in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19); etc. (cf. Yong 2016) –, they must fully accept this fact as a kind of contract between themselves and God, never calling it into doubt and thus not accepting poverty and suffering as their lot in life. Instead, they are to cultivate an optimistic mindset which focuses on how “blessed” they are and to affirm this attitude out loud wherever possible. The belief in the transformational power of words lies at the heart of positive confession: “Members are encouraged to always be vigilant concerning the power their words carry in shaping their thinking and their subsequent lives or realities. [...] Mental discipline, mental ‘hygiene,’ or self-censorship, should be an ongoing practice as demonstration of one’s faith” (Harrison 2005, 10–11). Through these means, adherents argue, health, wealth, and prosperity can be attained by anyone. This

line of reasoning can be seen as the smallest common denominator of prosperity theologies, their broad variety notwithstanding.

Prosperity theologies began emerging in neo-Pentecostal congregations in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s, but their roots lie in certain ways of thinking about spiritual power and the power of the mind at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. In particular, New Thought (an 1870s offshoot of Christian Science emphasizing the power of thought and speech), classical Pentecostalism of the early 20th century, and the pragmatism, individualism, and “mythology of uplift” that American society is known for, including African American spiritualism, shaped prosperity theologies as they exist today (Bowler 2013, 11). Norman Vincent Peale’s 1952 book *The Power of Positive Thinking* is considered as influential a source as televangelist Oral Robert’s “seed faith” concept, which laid the groundwork for more recent entrepreneurial, risk-taking varieties of prosperity discourse. Bowler argues that, in contrast to the biblically prescribed tithe of 10 per cent of one’s income, which can be seen as a secure investment as it constitutes part of a larger amount one has already received, seed faith money presents an additional donation that adds risk in the hopes of increasing returns (Bowler 2013: 67; cf. also Coleman 2017: 56–57). This idea has led to increasingly risky financial investment on part of prosperity adherents in the last decades with the aim of overcoming material poverty, physical suffering, and spiritual self-doubt, including in the Global South (Hunt 2002; Coleman 2016; Chesnut 2016).

While the growing popularity of prosperity churches around the world – in countries such as Brazil, Guatemala, Colombia, and other Latin American contexts, but also in Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, Southeast Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Eastern Europe – can be interpreted against the backdrop of the global dissemination of American religious and secular (i.e. capitalist) values (e.g. Brouwer et al. 1997), it is crucial to realize that prosperity churches in the Global South have long become religious actors in their own right that shape not only their own local and regional contexts in distinct ways but also strongly influence the international neo-Pentecostal scene through worldwide missionizing (e.g. Afolayan et al. 2018; Hunt 2000). For instance, the Brazilian Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), Latin America’s largest neo-Pentecostal denomination, has meanwhile established a visible presence in southern Africa (Freston 2005).

What is the worldwide appeal of prosperity churches? The promise of health, wealth, and “abundance” is obviously compelling to many, particularly but not exclusively the lower strata of global society (Attanasi/Yong 2016). It

seems to resonate in contexts of both material (absolute) deprivation, such as in the Global South, and of relative (perceived) deprivation, such as in the more affluent societies of the Global North (Hunt 2002), promising access to “the secular market not only as an enabler of open commerce but also as a somewhat exclusive space to which access is restricted but desired” (Coleman 2017: 52). In fact, prosperity theologies are attracting an increasing number of middle-class adherents with their promise of upward social mobility, including better jobs, better pay, no more loans and debt, and so forth (Martí 2008; Harrison 2005). Its messages are aimed at individuals (not at families, congregations, or communities) and may also encompass typical middle-class issues such as ameliorating circumstances in the workplace as well as improving one’s social or romantic life. Chesnut notes that prosperity theologies’ focus on health and healing is especially welcomed in contexts where the majority of adherents perform hard labor and do not have access to basic medical benefits such as sick leave and health care, while neo-Pentecostal exorcisms to drive out sickness are increasingly popular in the Global South as they dovetail with indigenous beliefs (2016: 221).

Whether the context is one of absolute or relative deprivation, it is important to note that the individualist ethos of prosperity theologies is at complete odds with more communally oriented interpretations of Christianity, such as Catholic Liberation Theology with its focus on communal justice and fundamental systemic change. In contrast, prosperity theologies emphasize individual “empowerment” by offering believers, who are usually the receivers of charity and assistance, the opportunity to “become active investors often in the same institution that facilitated a miracle in their lives or even helped them turn their lives around” (Chesnut 2016: 219). They are clearly strongly materialist in orientation, promoting what has been called “a kind of consumer ‘instantism’ [...] that prosperity and health is the automatic divine right of all bible-believing [sic] Christians” (Hunt 2002: 16). While prosperity teachings certainly perpetuate the global capitalist order, they are at the same time more complex than simply a ‘neoliberalization of religion’; for better or worse, the prosperity framework arguably grants moral agency to believers to work towards alleviating their own poverty through the market. Adherents believe that they are empowered by God to change their own circumstances by way of vocalizing their convictions of the better life that is in store for them and demonstrating the depth of their faith by spending money with the firm expectation of a multitude of divine rewards. Although there is no statistical evidence of overall social

benefits from prosperity teachings and practices, their popularity continues to remain high on a global scale (Ukah 2020; Soboyejo 2016; Chesnut 2016).

While early prosperity theologies were more miracle-based and other-worldly in orientation, observers are noting subtle shifts in current prosperity discourses around the globe that increasingly emphasize this-worldly salvation. Cornelio and Medina argue that giving and positive confession are, to a certain extent, a thing of the past; now, adherents are expected to develop investment and financial management skills with the goal of increasing financial revenue and freedom from debt. This new “prosperity ethic”, according to them, “promotes an individualized work ethic, backed by a religious conviction that promises financial returns” and is characterized by two main features: “*sacralizing self-help* and *celebrating consumption*” (Cornelio/Medina 2021, 65; italics in original). The first includes achieving individual prosperity through one’s own means instead of waiting for God to intervene, while the second refers not only to financial prosperity but, quite explicitly, to spending and consuming as a marker of a happy, fulfilled life. They argue that the new prosperity ethic “has three dimensions: the morality of the market (believing right), the prescribed mindset (thinking right), and the practical skills to accumulate wealth (doing it right)” (ibid.: 72). Joel Osteen, senior pastor of America’s largest megachurch, is a forerunner of the prosperity ethic in this sense (Freudenberg 2024; Freudenberg et al. 2020), which has meanwhile spread around the globe. Bartel (2021) has shown how spending and consumption – to the point of maximizing one’s credit card and running high debts – is considered a sign of absolute faith and trust in God in Columbia, while Ijaola notes “a shift from the ‘claim it and have it’ prosperity formula to ‘work it and have it’ by faith” in Sub-Saharan Africa in recent years (2018: 153).

Analytical investigations of the development of prosperity theologies have focused, on the one hand, on the marketization of religion and society, and, on the other, on convictions regarding capacity for change on part of individuals (Medina/Cornelio 2021). This contribution understands itself as located in the former line of investigation, given its focus on social forms as an expression of religious structure and the market exchange as a particularly salient form of social interaction in prosperity contexts. The following section begins with a brief overview of the concept of social form, referring to the volume’s introduction for a more detailed discussion, before presenting the various social forms that are evident in neo-Pentecostal prosperity contexts.

3. Social forms of religion in neo-Pentecostal prosperity contexts

The introduction to this volume defines social forms very generally as ways in which individuals coordinate social interaction, and social forms of religion subsequently as ways of coordinating interaction in the religious field. This includes not only religious interaction per se, as in during a worship service or group prayer, but also the 'background coordination' that makes religious interaction possible, such as maintaining a congregation or organizing an event. Social forms of religion are thus located at the meso level of society, between the macro and micro levels, where mediation between individuals and society at large occurs and the dynamics of communitization, of deepening interpersonal connections in the process of coordinating religious practice, come to the fore (Ludwig/Heiser 2014).

The introduction offers an overview of various typologies of religious social forms, including Max Weber's ideal types of *church* and *sect* (Weber 2011 [1905]); Ernst Troeltsch's (1960 [1912]) expansion of Weber's work and his addition of *mysticism* as a third type; H. Richard Niebuhr's (1929 [2005]) addition of *denomination* as an attempt to apply Troeltsch's typology to the American context; Howard Becker's (1940) alternative expansion of Troeltsch's work that includes *ecclesia*, *sect*, *denomination*, and *cult*; Bryan Wilson's (1970) sevenfold sub-typology of sects; Roy Wallis's (2019) distinction between world-affirming, world-rejecting, and world-accommodating cults; and Stark and Bainbridge's (1985) distinction between church, sect and cult. Instead of drawing on the typologies proposed by Weber and Troeltsch and subsequently expanded by other authors, however, this chapter draws from newer perspectives on social forms in the sociology of religion which also look toward organizational sociology for inspiration.

One of these is Beyer's distinction between organized religion, politicized religion, social movement religion, and communitarian/individualistic religion (Beyer 2003), which draws on organization, movement, and group as three types of social forms of religion. Following a slightly different approach, Krech et al. (2013) view group (or community), organization, and market exchange as the three main social forms of religion and add movement and event as two further sub-types. Similarly, Heiser and Ludwig (2014) present five social forms of religion: organizations, networks (including movements), communitization (or group dynamics), marketization, and eventization (the increasing importance of religious events). The following discussion on different social forms that are evident in neo-Pentecostal prosperity contexts draws

from this and other literature to show that a range of social forms shape neo-Pentecostal religion and are in turn influenced by prosperity ideologies.

In neo-Pentecostalism, congregations and small groups (such as Bible studies, prayer groups, and a range of other groups) are crucial: It is here that people come together to affirm and celebrate their beliefs, strengthen their social relationships, provide mutual support, and find means of accessing the divine in community. While these characteristics apply to religious congregations in general, the *group* is inevitably an important social form in neo-Pentecostalism. Here, prosperity teachings are disseminated among members and legitimated by way of shared practices, such as worship as a central, formalized ritual with its elements of preaching, prayer, and testimony, on the one hand, as well as through informal personal ties and close emotional bonds, on the other. In addition, weekly worship as a communitizing and legitimizing ritual can be conceived of as an *event* as a spatially, temporally, and socially condensed form of communal religious experience which transports participants out of the realm of the everyday and offers an extra-ordinary, cathartic experience (Hitzler 2011; Gebhardt 2018). Again, this social form is not exclusive to neo-Pentecostalism, being characteristic of other emotional, ecstatic traditions in and beyond Christianity. In prosperity contexts, however, the worship service and especially the sermon have the important function of elaborating the prosperity message and driving it home through specific performative and rhetoric strategies (cf. Freudenberg 2024 for an example).

At the same time, neo-Pentecostal congregations are usually embedded in an organizational context that provides the necessary personnel, structures, and resources to offer worship services and other forms of service to the community as well as to maintain staff, a building, and so on. This social form of *organization* may take the shape of a denomination, such as the Assemblies of God in the United States or the Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus ('Universal Church of the Kingdom of God') in Brazil. But there are also a multitude of non-denominational neo-Pentecostal congregations, many of them megachurches with an attendance of thousands of participants per weekend (cf. Thumma/Travis 2007), that are small organizations in themselves. Besides providing structures and resources for congregations, these denominations or non-denominational church organizations also facilitate access to (or are themselves nodes in) larger networks as channels for the further dissemination of prosperity theologies worldwide. As Coleman observes on organizational features of neo-Pentecostalism the United States,

a loosely knit organization called the International Convention of Faith Churches and Ministries (ICFCM) has provided some ideological unity in more recent years, alongside powerful educational establishments such as Oral Roberts University and Kenneth Hagin's Bible School, both based in Tulsa, Oklahoma. And yet, no single church form or organization has held definitive sway. For instance, the suburban, middle-class, post-denominational megachurch phenomenon of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has provided an important venue for dimensions of prosperity teaching (2017: 57).

In a similar vein, Harrison calls the neo-Pentecostal Word of Faith movement "a contemporary American religious subculture made up of denominationally independent churches, ministries, Bible training colleges and other educational institutions, voluntary organizations and fellowships, information and entertainment production facilities, and mass media broadcast networks" (2005: 5).

So while organizational structures are clearly evident in neo-Pentecostalism as a broader field, it also exhibits the characteristics of a *network*, with flatter hierarchies, decentralized power structures, and a global range. The Brazilian denomination Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus ('Universal Church of the Kingdom of God') again serves as a good example: It is based in São Paulo but has spawned subsidiaries not only throughout the country and region, but overseas, including in the United States, the United Kingdom, India, and, most importantly, southern Africa (Freston 2005). These 'sister churches' around the world are connected with each other through various channels, including through international conferences to share the latest developments and best practice examples, by way of guest preachers to expose congregations to different styles of preaching and interpreting the prosperity message, but most importantly through the internet and social media. In this way, the UCKG is able to integrate a range of different social actors and roles on this basis of a common identity, all the while maintaining distinct yet porous boundaries to ensure flexibility in the many different contexts it has (and continues to) spread to. Other prominent examples of global neo-Pentecostal prosperity networks that operate similarly include the Nigeria-based Redeemed Christian Church of God (Adogame 2004) and the originally Australian Hillsong Church (Rocha et al. 2021).

As mentioned in the introduction, the social forms of network and movement are often understood as somehow related, albeit in different ways, in the literature (e.g. Ludwig/Heiser 2014; Williams 2003). Social (including religious)

movements have been defined as networks consisting of group and organization elements assembled around a collective identity, common goals, and resource mobilization and aimed at bringing about social (or religious, or political) change (Kern/Pruisken 2018). Neo-Pentecostal prosperity settings have been described as taking the social form of “meeting combined with movement: coming together while never quite wishing to accept stasis and institutionalization” (Coleman 2016: 281). At the same time, observers argue that the designation of movement misses the mark, as the term implies more coherence than is actually apparent in the field (e.g. Coleman 2017). The breadth of variety found in global neo-Pentecostalism – also considering that many neo-Pentecostal congregations are non-denominational instead of being part of a larger denomination (Walton 2016) – should not be underestimated, particularly in terms of how it affects the development of its social forms. Hunt emphasizes that “the designation of this relatively new religious phenomenon as a ‘movement’ is a misnomer, since the distinctive Faith gospel is represented by hundreds of independent ministries which might depart, to one degree or another, in both practice and doctrine, from the core teachings. What cannot be doubted, however, is the global significance of these ministries.” (2002: 2). I agree with this assessment; although neo-Pentecostalism is often described as a ‘movement’ even in academic literature, the term is not used in a sociological but more in a popular sense, implying development and innovation instead of stasis. While neo-Pentecostalism is certainly a dynamic field, it lacks the unity – shared identity, goals, and resource mobilization – that would render it a coherent movement from a sociological perspective.

In the context of prosperity theologies, the *market exchange* is a salient social form that deserves special attention considering the fact that believers are encouraged to actively invest in their faith, their congregations, and the secular market as a sign of their conviction that God will reward them with “abundance”. The market exchange involves exchange partners – individuals or groups – that come together for a limited amount of time to negotiate and conduct a transaction. Krech et al. (2013: 55–56) argue that because the exchange is a rational form of interaction, the exchange partners are included in this social form based on their formal roles and functions, not on their personalities. In slight contrast, Ludwig and Heiser (2014: 6) point out that both rational cost/benefit analyses as well as communally negotiated norms and values establish the basis for market exchanges. From the perspective of microeconomics, negotiating norms and values in the process of the market transaction falls under the individual’s cost/benefit analysis, which means, for

a discussion of social forms, that the exchange partners are in fact included based on their formal roles in the exchange (cf. Freudenberg/Rezania 2023: 85–125 for an overview of basic assumptions in microeconomics).

In prosperity churches, then, who are the exchange partners? They may be conceived of as the believer, on the one hand, and the divine, on the other: The believer invests time and effort to learn “who they are in Christ” and attain the skill of positive confession (Harrison 2005: 8–11), and invests money in and beyond their congregation to ultimately sow the seeds of health, wealth, and prosperity. This is an inevitably tricky analytical construct from a social scientific perspective as the divine is of course not a concrete empirical social agent; but considering that it is the task of the sociology of religion to investigate the social consequences of individual and collective religious beliefs, prosperity theology adherents’ conviction that God responds to and rewards their investments must be taken seriously, also from an analytical vantage point. This means conceptualizing the divine as one ‘partner’ involved in prosperity transactions. Another way of understanding the partners included in the market exchange in prosperity contexts is the believer, on the one hand, and their congregation, on the other. In return for the believer’s spiritual and monetary investment, the congregation grants affirmation and legitimacy to the individual’s conviction that God will reward them with a healthy, wealthy, and prosperous life. The same framework could be applied to the believer and the congregation’s pastor: The pastor as preacher and spiritual guide but also as a main beneficiary of donations to the congregation encourages individual believers’ investments in return for the promise that God will reward them abundantly. In this case, the pastor represents the rewards promised by the divine in the form of his (or, more seldomly, her) own prosperity.

However, prosperity teachings have consequences that extend beyond the realm of the congregation. As adherents are encouraged to “celebrat[e] consumption” (Cornelio/Medina 2021: 65) by spending money as a sign of a blessed, fulfilled life, by conducting risky financial investments, and even by taking on debt to show their absolute faith in divine rewards, the social form of market transaction in prosperity contexts also includes transactions between believers and agents in the secular market. The latter may or may not hold prosperity convictions of their own, but secular market transactions become part of a larger set of religious practices from an analytical perspective as soon as believers frame spending money in the secular realm as an act of faith. When a prosperity adherent is encouraged by their pastor as spiritual guide to invest in something as seemingly mundane as, say, new living room furniture

to demonstrate their conviction that God will abundantly reward their positive, optimistic mindset with health and wealth, the seemingly ‘secular’ act of buying furniture is coded religiously, i.e. as a divine investment that will reap multiple returns (cf. Freudenberg 2024 and Freudenberg et al. 2020 for examples). It is in this sense that prosperity teachings create a kind of ‘double value’ through investment: On one level, the believer invests in new furniture, increasing the value of their home; on the other, they invest in their religious convictions, increasing their expectation of manifold returns (cf. Coleman 2017: 62–63).

We arguably see here the extent to which prosperity semantics correspond to the social forms prosperity practices take. The main tenets of prosperity teachings have come to include not only investments in one’s personal faith and one’s congregation, but also increasingly risky and debt-prone transactions on the secular market. The market exchange – conceived of as taking place between the believer and God, or the congregation, or the pastor, or, importantly, agents in the secular market as exchange partners – is evidently the social form of religion best suited to ‘translate’ the central prosperity tenets into concrete social practices, as it allows individuals to interact and coordinate with one another in a way that gives expression to those religious ideas they, for better or worse, hold most valuable.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has focused on neo-Pentecostal prosperity theologies as a distinct yet diverse tradition within Pentecostalism to show the range of social forms that are evident in the ways that adherents come together to coordinate their faith: group, event, organization, network, and market exchange. It has suggested that the social form of market exchange is particularly salient in this context due to its correspondence with prosperity semantics: Prosperity theologies teach that investment not only in one’s personal faith and one’s congregation, but also and importantly in the secular market, will be rewarded by God in multiple ways – especially with physical and emotional health as well as material wealth –, and these semantics are mirrored on a structural level by the market exchange as a form of transaction between two parties. Given the fact that financial risk-taking and success on the secular market are coded religiously as signs of depth of faith and divine grace, the market exchange complements these core tenets by translating semantics into structure, as it were.

This is not to render any of the other social forms discussed above less important; for other dimensions of neo-Pentecostalism, such as community cohesion or globally organized structures, they remain central. As analytical categories, all of them could (and should) be investigated in more depth against the backdrop of the congruence between form and semantics. It is necessary to keep in mind that religions always exhibit a mix of social forms, with important effects on how religions – especially their core ideas – develop over time. In this sense, a closer investigation of the tension between community and individualism in neo-Pentecostalism would further our understanding regarding the importance of the social form of group and the dynamics of communitization just as much as an investigation of the logistical structures that undergird neo-Pentecostal denominations and megachurches would further our understanding of the centrality of organization and network as social forms. The correspondence between semantics and structure is thus not limited to a single social form; this chapter has highlighted the market exchange in the effort of making an indent in the larger work on social forms to be done in and beyond the neo-Pentecostal field.

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