Pentecostal Social Engagement in Contemporary Guatemala

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Abstract *This essay explores emerging social forms in the context of Pentecostal social engagement in the Central American nation of Guatemala. It explores why in this specific context, evangélicos and Pentecostals in particular have begun to develop new social forms and hermeneutics of social transformation. Guatemala has undergone a tectonic epistemological shift from a post-temporal, apocalyptic orientation to one that is presentist and instrumentalist in its outlook. Pentecostals in recent decades have transitioned from an eschatological hermeneutics of separation from the world to one that embraces social and political participation, cohering, in the process, into social forms that emphasize collective mobilization and participation. This evolution of religious social forms corresponds to a shifting emphasis in religious ideals and theologies that become self-reinforcing logics within the vertical and horizontal networks of the church. Pastors build strong vertical patriarchal relations with their congregants, and they purposefully encourage strong lateral networks within "small groups," formed around different affinities, such as geography, interest, age, marital status, or demographic, that strengthen the group cohesion of the church as both a community and as an institution As these social relationships evolve, they transform the role of the church as an organization to one of increased, outward-facing social action. This chapter posits that this transition evinces an evolution of evangélico social forms. These differ in fundamental ways from classical Pentecostalism, which reified insularity, to modern social forms that adhere to religious values that they believe compel them to action.*

Keywords *Guatemala, hermeneutics, Latin America, Pentecostalism, social forms, social groups, social mobilization, theology*

1. Introduction

In 1990, the US anthropologist David Stoll published an early study on the rapid expansion of Protestantism, and specifically Pentecostalism, in Latin America entitled *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (1990). The book's subtitle exposed an expectation as to the implications of religious conversion that pervades much of the literature to the present day. Both scholars and popular observers of Pentecostalism in Latin America have often defined the religion's function as one that is or should be, fundamentally political and socially engaged.

This work will explore how and why in the specific context of the Central American nation of Guatemala, *evangélicos* (used here in the Spanish sense to describe all Protestants, not only 'Evangelicals,' as the term means in English), and Pentecostals in particular, have begun to shift their individual and group religious understandings, as well as their own and institutional expectations, from staunch apoliticism to a new hermeneutics of social engagement. During what the noted British-Brazilian sociologist Paul Freston (1994) designated as the 'first wave' of wholesale conversions in Guatemala – roughly, the 1970s and 1980s, during the nation's civil war – these 'Classical' Pentecostals were perhaps the least likely of any sector to get involved in politics or political action of any kind. In sharp contrast, many of today's Pentecostals believe that their beliefs *compel* them to action (cf. Garrard-Burnett 2012). Pentecostals in recent decades have transitioned from an eschatological hermeneutics of separation from the world to one that embraces social and political participation, cohering, in the process, into social forms that emphasize collective mobilization and participation. This evolution of religious social forms corresponds to a shifting emphasis in religious ideals and theologies. As these social relationships evolve, they transform the role of the church as an organization – which previously prioritized insularity – to one of increased, outward-facing social action.

I posit that this transition evinces an evolution of *evangélico* social forms. These differ in fundamental ways from Classical Pentecostalism. Concepts of personhood and theological concerns throughout Latin America, even as recently as the 1980s, were fixated upon end times prophecies and the centrality of the salvation narratives within a social universe that they called "the church," but in practice, consisted of many disaggregated denominations and individual congregations. These religious groups were connected only by a shared embrace of key charismatic theological beliefs and somatic practices, specifically,

an emphasis on "baptism in the Holy Spirit", manifest by "gifts", such as faith healing and speaking in tongues.

Classical Pentecostalism was extraordinarily atomized and highly individualized, as believers established their bona fides not by joining a specific church, but in their individual abilities to performatively manifest Charismatic virtues such as offering individual conversion stories and engaging in ecstatic behavior during worship services. A third characteristic of Classical Pentecostalism was its centrifugal tendency, as any individual member who had a unique Charismatic vision or heterodox theological perspective, regardless of his or (less commonly her) training or experience as a pastor, could and often did break off to start their own church, taking sectors of their home congregation with them. These factors all conspired to make Classical Pentecostalism in Latin America dynamic, but also very fragile in terms of social cohesion, and the churches weak in their collective efficacy as social organizations.

All this has changed over the past three or four decades, as the dynamism of Pentecostalism has generated new theologies that are presentist rather than eschatological in orientation, and which emphasize new technologies of self (self-improvement, capacity-building, education, wealth acquisition, and consumerism, leadership training) instead of focusing on the imminent Second Coming of Christ, the prophetic vaticination that animated their predecessors. The scholarly literature refers to this orientation as 'neo-Pentecostalism', an etic designation that few believers or pastors would utilize or even recognize; nevertheless, it is the dominant religious strain in Guatemalan Pentecostalism, as it is in most of Latin America.

Neo-Pentecostalism encourages and flourishes in large mega-churches. These types of churches typically gravitate around the Charismatic leadership of a single pastor, who often presides with his wife or other close family members as leadership affiliates. Pastors build strong vertical patriarchal relations with their congregants, and they purposefully encourage strong lateral networks within "small groups" (a term of art used in the churches); some congregations call these *grupos celulares*, or cellular groups, reflecting the aspiration that the groups reproduce themselves like cells undergoing mitosis in a living organism. Small groups form around different affinities, such as geography, interest, age, marital status, or demographic, that strengthen the group cohesion of the church as both a community and as an institution. The groups function as a social formation designed to encourage strong horizontal interpersonal relationships among group members. At the same time, they

reinforce horizontal, patriarchal relations between the groups and the church as an institution as embodied by the pastor; these horizontal and vertical relations stabilize the structure of the church and the authority of its leader.

This is especially crucial in a very large church such as Guatemala's Fraternidad Cristiana, for example, which boasts an average Sunday attendance of 12.000 at services (cf. Célulares Fráter 2023).

In a congregation that is the size of a small town, many members may never otherwise have an opportunity to have a personal relationship with or even experience a one-on-one conversation with their pastor. But the small groups, as per Simmel, help to establish a relationship of super- and subordination that makes the believer predisposed to be bound by their pastor's mandates and teachings (1909: 289–322).

Horizontal groups encourage interpersonal relationships between friends and families, and small groups form close and coherent social groups; these connect and overlap with one another, thus reinforcing the church's hegemony across the totality of a member's life. These connections, at least in theory, provide for the believer and their family on every level of human need: friendship, career connections, financial education, leadership training, education, moral edification, support in life's sufferings, and, lest we forget, salvific assurances through involvement in the church. Churches, as organizations, typically allow members to come and go at will, but even deeply disillusioned members are socialized to such an extent that they often find it difficult to challenge the leadership or to leave the comprehensive world that the church provides, along with the social groups within it (Schmidt 2019; Alexander 2012: 1049–1078).

Neo-Pentecostal pastors typically have a higher degree of religious training than their Classical Pentecostal counterparts (although this is by no means a *sine qua non* to be a pastor, as charism and the ability to rally a congregation are the key qualifications for the job). They are usually connected to other pastors through regional, national, and even international Pentecostal nodes and networks. Through these, they are aware of and responsive to new currents and trends in their field. In this respect, Pentecostalism, displays elements that mark it as a religio-social movement, even as expressions within a belief and practice within a given congregation are locally derived and contextualized (Powe 1994).

2. Setting the political context

Guatemala has one of the largest *evangélico* populations, percentagewise, of any nation in Latin America. Just over 40 per cent of the population is Protestant and the vast majority of these – upwards of 80 per cent – are Pentecostals, the vigorous legacy of the conversion "boom" of the early 1970s.[1] The boom was concurrent with and in some respects a response to the 36-year-long armed conflict during which Guatemala's ferociously anti-communist military conducted deadly counterinsurgency campaigns against a small but tenacious leftist armed movement.

The violent nadir of the armed conflict took place in the early 1980s, when an idiosyncratic neo-Pentecostal general, Efraín Ríos Montt (1982–1983), headed up a full-throttle military campaign to defeat the leftist guerrillas and their indigenous supporters. A new convert to Pentecostalism, the general publicly advocated what he touted as Christian moral teachings on corruption and family values at the same time that he commanded a scorched-earth campaign in the rural countryside, which also killed, displaced, and terrorized many tens of thousands of Maya indigenous peoples (cf. Garrard-Burnett 1998). Although many urban elites, non-Mayas, and *evangélicos* admired Ríos Montt, subsequent revelations about the brutality of his regime did much to sully his name and his Pentecostal associations along with it for a time, and for good reason. The general was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity in 2013. In the words of one Guatemalan pastor, "Like many of my generation, I was convinced that if the head of government were healthy (*sana*) [meaning *evangélico*], the social-political body would also become healthy. But history has shown us the irrationality of such ideas" (Cajas 2009: unpaginated).

Democracy returned to Guatemala in 1986, and the armed conflict concluded in 1996. However, Guatemala remains a country where what political scientists Guillermo Trejo and Camilo Nieto-Matiz term "criminal wars – armed conflicts by which states fight organized criminal groups and fight among themselves for control over illicit economies and territories – have emerged as one of the most lethal types of conflict in the world today, surpassing the death toll of the typical civil war of the second half of the twentieth century" (2022: 1328). Today, despite small signs of improvement, the nation

1 https://www.statista.com/statistics/1067082/guatemala-religion-affiliation-share-type/

continues to struggle with many of the very same social and economic inequalities that militants in the 1970s and 1980s had sought to bring an end to in the first place.

Guatemala's earlier unresolved social, political, and economic problems in recent years have been augmented by an intractable array of new challenges, including endemic violent crime (the nation suffers some of the highest rates of homicide in the world), rampant narcotrafficking, corrupt and ineffective government, deeply engrained racism against the indigenous majority, widespread gang violence, the drain of productive human capital through emigration, and new inequities resulting from neoliberal economics (cf. Lessing 2017; Trejo 2020). The unexpected election of Bernardo Arévalo, a reformist and progressive, to the presidency in August 2023 – if Guatemalan's political elites actually allow him to assume power – promises what Guatemalans call a *nueva primavera*, or new spring, for the nation, but genuine progress, even under optimal circumstances, will remain a serious challenge for any government.[2]

3. From quiescence to mobilization: Shifts in the Pentecostal worldview

Notwithstanding the extremity of this context, Guatemala's *evangélicos*, until relatively recently, have kept themselves at a remove from social or political action, both for strategic and theological reasons. Subscribing to a *fugamundi* outlook (literally, 'flee the world'), they framed their moral constructs around a strict binary dividing "the church" and "the world" the former a safe haven of salvation, the latter dangerous and sinful. In Classical Pentecostalism, the only contact between these two spheres should be through prayer and evangelization.

By contrast, neo-Pentecostals, whose churches started to come of age in Guatemala in the late 1980s, embrace the notion of the manifestation of the Holy Spirit through temporal transformation: theirs is an instrumentalist theology that is very much of the here-and-now. Neo-Pentecostalism focuses not only on healing – a traditional Pentecostal preoccupation – but also promises faithful believers wealth and temporal success, a belief known as prosperity

2 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-66569014.

theology. Not only in Guatemala but across the Global South, prosperity theology enjoys enormous appeal in places where urbanization, late-stage capitalism, and neo-liberalism in the late 20th and 21st centuries have eroded already fragile rural lifeways. In these settings, where traditional *saberes* (knowledge and ways of being) gave way, prosperity theology seemed to open up access to modernity's enchantments: consumer goods, lucrative employment, social stability, and respect (cf. Bowler 2018).

Neo-Pentecostals believe that God wishes them to have "life abundant" (John 10:10) in ways that are material and quantifiable: to ask God for less is not merely unwise, but unfaithful. They focus on the improvement of the individual through prayer and ascetic practices such as fasting; most importantly, they trust in God's power, which they believe flows to the individual, to his or her family, and then, almost by osmosis, permeates the church, the community, and beyond. God, in the neo-Pentecostal *imaginaire*, is a direct and negotiable agent in every matter of daily life, no matter how mundane or acquisitive.

For the proponents of this highly instrumentalist theology, as Daniel Míguez has noted, prosperity theology "inverts the moral value of acquisition and capitalism": money is no longer "the root of all evil," (1 Timothy 6:10) but tangible proof of God's sovereignty and grace (2001: 4). Pastors urge believers to give money and give again to the limits of their abilities and beyond, as a sign of their faith that God will provide, and do so abundantly, in the exchange. As a form of market exchange, prosperity theology reifies capitalist acquisition and serves as a heuristic through which religious 'consumers' enter into a symbolic marketplace where they are able to purchase, through their faith and tithing, both credence goods (as per Gill) as well as greater access to consumer materialism (cf. Gill 1998).

Thus is resolved the apparent paradox of Pentecostal pastors who display ostentatious wealth – well-tailored suits, expensive cars, fine homes, even private planes – purchased with believers' tithes and 'widow's mites.' Prosperity theology's devotees see these things not as signs of decadence, but rather as positive affirmation of blessing: it is a powerful signifier of the potential goodness available to every believer who seeks it. Within the world of prosperity theology, a well-coiffed pastor with an elegant wife clothed in designer apparel and a second home in Miami is a living testament to the good life abundant that awaits poor and aspiring Central American congregates, for whom economic and social access to capitalism's enchantments seem otherwise closed off. Believers understand prosperity theology to be a rational market interaction in

which they exchange their time (via church attendance), talent (participation), and above all their treasure (donations), with every expectation that they will be able to maximize personal gain in return.

Within this matrix of understanding, there has not been any real theological space for social justice considerations, because prosperity theology *et in se* posits a market exchange that promises to bring those who suffer from poverty and inequality into the shining world of modernity and capitalism (cf. Freudenberg's chapter in this volume). However, it is important to remember that prosperity theology is also an actual *theology* –that is to say, it is a systematic method of relating to the divine. Because of this, access to the modality is, understandably, religious, through evangelization: spreading the message of the church and bringing others into the congregation. Evangelization is paramount to church growth, which is a trope within Guatemalan Pentecostalism, as for Pentecostals, church growth (*iglecrecimiento*, a neologism that combines the Spanish words for 'church' [*iglesia*] and 'growth' [*crecimiento*]) is a quantifiable measure of a church's vigor, prosperity, and favor in the eyes of God. It is, therefore, the critical obligation of all believers to bring individuals in from the cold of the soulless secular world to the warm and sanctified embrace of the church.

And the arms of the church are indeed expansive. Scholars such as Brusco, Mariz, Smilde, and Santos have demonstrated that there are many varieties of collateral social goods that can accrue from belonging to an Evangelical church – problems with alcohol diminish, *machismo* is tamed, family violence decreases, educational levels often increase. This said, after adopting these value-rational (*wertrational*) behaviors, *evangélicos* do not distinguish themselves from others in this regard to the degree that Max Weber, writing from his observations on the rise of capitalism in Western Europe, predicted in his work the Protestant ethic and on society and economy. Be that as it may, all these transformations continue to take place *within* the church and the church family, not outside of it (cf. Mariz 1994; Burdick 1993; Brusco 1995; Smilde 2007; Santos 2012).

A key aspect of this discourse is that neo-Pentecostal churches encourage self-improvement on all fronts, for which they mandate new technologies of the self (Garrard 2020: 191–236). These typically range from dictating mode of dress to personal comportment, to issues of health (often dealt with by spiritual rather than medical interventions), to the nature of daily interactions with friends and family, hobbies, and pastimes (members may attend church every single day and devote nearly all their free time to church-related activi-

ties). Danish sociologist Martin Lindhardt underscores the centrality of a Pentecostal identity to a believer's own personhood: "[T]he faith-drenched life of Pentecostals/charismatics and the ways in which notions of sacred agency and interference in human affairs pervades their life worlds shape their everyday experiences and interpretations of events, and enable them to cultivate a certain sense of agency," he writes. "[A]dherents live their religiosity on an everyday basis" (Lindhardt 2012: 7).

The church thus becomes an encompassing universe for a member, colonizing mind, body, and spirit for Christ. Churches encourage members to constantly read devotional and edifying texts and improve their spiritual education, and they provide training (often in the small groups) for leadership, economic stewardship, and general *capatación* (training and empowerment). Neo-Pentecostal churches demonstrably generate substantial amounts of human capital for their members, as evinced, for example, in the leadership skills they learn through the church. In the words of Lindhardt, "they create new practical skills and new ways of relating to oneself and the social world," (2011: 5) although that social world may, in fact, be only as large as the church itself.

The church produces a social universe in which interpersonal relations, personal networks, horizontal, and low-hierarchy relations built on a shared faith vision and *confianza* (trust and confidence: a coveted commodity of rare and inestimable value in Guatemala). This function is especially cohesive at the small group level, although the vertical linkages that membership provides farther up the hierarchy of the church can also be beneficial, not unlike the practice of *compadrazgo* (godparent relations) that bound patrons with reciprocal obligations to peasant families in earlier eras. Daniel Levine is one of several sociologists who have demonstrated that this is particularly true in leadership training and the teaching of executive function skills that men and especially women would likely not learn elsewhere (Levine/Stoll 1997: 63–103). But they can also make great *demands* on human capital, as the church can become a self-referential loop of meetings, services, small groups, and people that absorbs almost all the time, talents, emotions, and attention of its members.

In dealing with an outside "world" that they still largely regard as hostile and dangerous, Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches have been more wary, even regarding charitable work. Even neo-Pentecostal churches, broadly speaking, do not share a common vision with Mainline Christians as to the meaning of Jesus' teachings about charity or the need to contribute to a worldly *summum bonum*, nor do they reify extending a helping hand to the poor and

needy outside of their own communities. As Samuel Berberian, a leading Guatemalan Pentecostal educator, explained to me in a personal conversation: "We have simply not had the theology for that."[3]

4. Toward a Pentecostal hermeneutics of social engagement?

4.1 The Seven Mountains of Iglesia El Shaddai

There is a particular sector of neo-Pentecostalism, however, that claims this view reflects a limited view of God's potential to transform: for them, it is a short conceptual leap from believing that God wishes to upgrade the faithful believer's economic status to believing that He desires to improve the institutions, economic and social conditions, and governance in which one lives. The argument in favor of the church taking on these challenges is compelling in a place like Guatemala, where corrupt government, a nearly absent rule of law, a frail justice system, and the outsize roles played by illegal actors – narcotraffickers, gangs, and a venal political-economic elite – have all eroded civil society's ability to uphold its responsibilities to maintain the nation's public institutions and its people.

Guatemala's example par excellence of activist Pentecostalism is a Guatemala City-based pastor, Dr. Harold Caballeros, who has been willing to venture into this void. In the early post-war years, Caballeros envisioned a much larger role for himself and his church in transforming Guatemala, with the larger objective of bringing the entire nation into the Pentecostal fold. Caballeros was founder and pastor of a El Shaddai, a wealthy Guatemala City megachurch with a significant presence in other areas of the country. In the early 1990s, he launched his first large-scale crusade for national reformation, a campaign of prayer and revival called *Jesus es Señor de Guatemala*. In this national-wide public effort, Caballeros called upon *evangélicos* – even those who did not belong to El Shaddai – to pray and fast for the welfare of the nation, calling for the redemption of the nation and call to abundant life, by the grace of God.

The Jesus is Lord of Guatemala campaign was an aspirational social movement, built on Caballeros' initiative, but the ideas behind it grew out of an

3 Personal conversation, July 28, 2006.

emergent new current within global Pentecostalism known as the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), of which Caballeros was an early proponent and later known as a "prophet." The NAR is an international Pentecostal/Evangelical network that promotes the notion that divine revelation is still unfolding in the contemporary world, and that God speaks directly to modern day prophets and apostles. These men, although there are a few women in the movement, believe they are specifically anointed to help bring their own nations, and indeed the whole world, under Christ's authority and governance. This they refer to as bringing "dominion": leading their nations into a new era where Christian leadership and values will rebuild fallen and sinful societies.

Dominion theology digresses from Classical Pentecostalism or even standard neo-Pentecostalism in its willingness – indeed its eagerness – to engage with the secular world and to flood it with a Christian message that advances very conservative and literally-defined "biblical values" (cf. Cowen 2021; Stewart 2020; Ingersoll 2015; Goldberg 2006; Hedges 2006; Diamond 1995). While the main arena for engagement is in politics, dominionism calls for Evangelical domination across seven key areas of influence that they believe form the bedrock of secular modernity. These are the so-called "Seven Mountains" (7M): 1) faith and religion, 2) politics and government, 3) family, 4) media and communications, 5) arts and entertainment, 6) education, and 7) business/economics. Dominionism calls upon Christians to "invade" and dominate each of these spheres in order to restore "godly" and "biblical" values to the world (Wallnau/Johnson 2013). By way of example, Paula White, a well-known North American pastor, advocate of 7M, and Christian nationalist, rationalized her support for Donald Trump' tendentious January 6, 2021 insurrection in the United States by framing it in the language of providential dominion. "We have God-given authority," she stated plainly, "to take over the world".[4]

The NAR also promotes the tenets of "spiritual warfare", a wide-spread practice in which Pentecostals pray and (literally) exorcise malign beings such as fallen angels, demons which have held people and places in their thrall, thus shutting them off from God's presence and goodness (O'Neill 2012). This is a Pentecostal practice that began in the 1980s and has spread rapidly through Pentecostal networks as a concrete ritual modality, although non-Pentecostals might consider it as a metaphoric resistance to social and moral changes that

4 Cf. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/day6/mrna-after-covid-19-blowing-up-trump-plaza-crokicurl-history-of-swear-words-and-more-1.5874120/how-a-conservative-christian-movement-became-an-important-part-of-trump-s-political-strategy-1.5874143.

challenge traditional cultural and biblical values (such as abortion and same-sex marriage). In parts of Latin America, it is also strongly associated with Pentecostal enmity to indigenous- and African-spiritual beliefs and practices that remain active features on the religious landscape of the region. For example, spiritual warfare in Brazil is largely directed toward the exorcism of *exús* and *pomba giras* and other African spirits (cf. Reuter's chapter in this volume), while in places such as Guatemala, Peru, or Bolivia, where there are large indigenous populations, it highlights the targeting of native saints and gods. By contrast, in Argentina, which has the highest rate of psychologists per capita in the world, spiritual warfare combats mental illness as a spiritual disease.[5]

For believers themselves, however, these celestial struggles with evil are anything but symbolic: rather, they are physical and concrete. In 1990, for example, Guatemala's Caballeros claimed that workers on the El Shaddai church's new property unearthed an enormous pre-Columbian earthwork of a serpent, which he associated Mesoamerican god Quetzalcoatl. To Pastor Harold, this discovery provided both a soteriological explanation for Guatemala's troubled history and the opportunity for Caballeros to champion his theology, especially since the graven image's excavation happened to coincide neatly with the launch of the *Jesus es Señor* crusade (cf. Caballeros 2001). Declaring that "our entire country was dedicated [in 300 BC] to Satan," Caballeros used the *Jesus es Señor* platform to call upon all Guatemala to pray fervently for their country to deliver it at last from the power of malevolent Mesoamerican false gods and fallen spirits that had controlled its destiny since even before the arrival of Europeans (Stoll 1994: 99).

By the turn of the new century, Caballeros expanded his vision of direct engagement by neo-Pentecostals in prayer and politics toward the "redemption" of their nation. Here, he moved away from the standard Pentecostal repertoire of prayer, fasting, and deliverance toward practical interventions in the lives of church members, intended to build their social and human capital in a variety of ways, including training in extensive *capacitación* (capacity-building), self-improvement, and furthering education. All of this took place in small groups connected to the church and was the lynchpin of the formation of what Caballeros calls "Christian citizenship." A key aspect of this citizenship is preparing ordinary people for leadership, whether that be as modest as running a small business or as lofty as being summoned to the highest level

5 Cf. https://qz.com/734450/almost-everyone-in-buenos-aires-is-in-therapy.

of servanthood, even to the godless world of government or business. As Kevin Lewis O'Neill has shown in his work, *City of God: Christian Citizenship in Guatemala* (2010a), while Caballeros' tipping point for national transformation has remained elusive, the principles of "Christian citizenship," largely by way of small prayer and study groups affiliated with El Shaddai, have become active in networks for capacity-building and shared *confianza* among Guatemalan Pentecostals, catapulting members into prominent leadership positions in business and education within the country.

Capacitación has benefits not least of all for Pastor Harold himself, who ran for President of Guatemala in two elections. Though unsuccessful both times, his campaign for the presidency in 2011 resulted in his being named foreign minister in the administration of President Otto Pérez Molina. After his government service, Caballeros continued to expand his influence across almost every sphere of the Seven Mountain Mandate. While his wife, Cecilia, continued as the head pastor of the 12.000 member El Shaddai church that he founded (which remains the spiritual home of many government and business leaders), Caballeros actively expanded his portfolio. He served as founder and rector of Universidad San Pablo, Guatemala's largest Evangelical university, the mission of which is to train professionals in Christian moral values and principles in order to become "agents of transformation in the society they live in;" he became president and founder of Radio Visión Corporation, a network of twenty five Evangelical radio stations; he is founder and former director of FUEDES (Fundación Educative El Shaddai), a system of Christian schools in rural areas of the country "designed to inculcate a worldview of values and principles that affect the nation," and, along with his wife, headed "Manos de Amor," a church-affiliated development program that works in rural areas (El Shaddai 2010: unpaginated).

On top of all this, Caballeros is also the founder of a political party called *Vision con Valores* (VIVA), which in 2015 ran Zury Ríos, an Evangelical Christian and daughter of the genocidal general of the early 1980s, at the head of its ticket.[6] Caballeros also served as facilitator for Guatemala's 'Vision Plan' (*Plan Visión de País*), a UNESCO-sponsored initiative which consolidated the role of political parties as interlocutors between society and state during the 2020 presidential regime (Caballeros 2001).

6 Cf. https://www.as-coa.org/articles/six-numbers-understand-guatemalas-surprising-2023-general-election-results.

For a long moment, Caballeros' successful summiting of all the Dominionism's Seven Mountains seemed to have made him a bellwether of Pentecostal social mobilization and political ascendency. His star continued to rise until two events – the disclosure of offshore bank accounts and commercial real estate holdings in Miami he had purchased with church monies in 2016, followed by his injury in a near-fatal traffic accident while traveling in Germany in September 2022 – tumbled him from the summits of success.[7]

And yet, the rise and fall of Harold Caballeros serves as a rich case study, perhaps even an archetype, for a new type of leader in Latin America: that of a well-connected and influential religious leader who successfully uses his networks, suasion, and connections to articulate and implement a social and political program that advances Pentecostal religious values and ambitions. We can see Caballeros' successes mirrored elsewhere across the continent in the influence of highly visible, well-connected religious actors in Brazil, Bolivia, Mexico, and elsewhere in the region. We need only look toward the strong support that Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro received from powerful megachurch pastors such as Edir Macedo and Silas Malafaia; or to the influence that Mexico's *evangélicos* wielded in demanding that Mexico's leftist president Andres López Obrador's administration issue a national *cartilla moral* (moral primer) in return for their support; or to the prominent role that *evangélicos* played in Bolivia in the ouster of Evo Morales during his attempt to remain in the presidency in 2019 to see that the days of quiescent Pentecostal leadership is long past (cf. Cowen 2021).

4.2 Centro Esdras

Notwithstanding decades of prayer and fasting, Guatemala remains a deeply troubled nation, as far from the tipping point of redemption as ever, and even for *evangélicos*, this is a paradox that is impossible to ignore. With this in mind, in July 2009, Centro Esdras, an *evangélico* non-profit organization founded by a pastor named Israel Ortiz, convened a meeting of Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors in Guatemala City. The conference theme, *Rostros del Protestantismo en Guatemala* (Faces of Protestantism in Guatemala) did not hint at the event's

7 Cf. https://www.evangelicodigital.com/sociedad/24339/harold-caballeros-sufrio-un-accidente-en-alemania; https://cmiguate.org/iglesias-politica-y-millones-de-dolares-harold-caballeros-y-los-panamapapers/; https://www.businessobserverfl.com/news/2016/may/27/stay-classy/.

subtle but urgent agenda, which was to establish a framework for developing a theology for Evangelical social engagement *en su propia manera* (in their own way). In contrast to Caballeros' *Jesus es Señor* initiative and Christian citizenship projects, which were driven by Caballeros' charisma and his 7M aspirations, Ortiz drew his inspiration from the issue that Berberian (above) articulated: the lack of a Pentecostal theology of social consciousness.

At the time, Ortiz's was a unique vision to redirect and mobilize Pentecostal social potential by channeling *evangelicos'* value-driven rational behaviors to help address secular society's most dire problems. Ortiz's proposal hoped to build on conventional Pentecostal beliefs and priorities, but it also embraced a much more capacious view of what constituted the body and boundaries of 'the church'. Specifically, Ortiz envisaged, per Turner, the building of *communitas* by creating a more porous membrane between the church and secular world[8] (Turner 1969: 96). This task was doubly complicated not only in that it required a radical re-reading of Guatemalan *evangélico* theology, but it also demanded a high degree of coordinated organizational decision making that seems almost impossible, given the highly disaggregated nature of Guatemalan Protestantism and Pentecostalism in particular (cf. Starkloff 1997).

Despite these known challenges, Ortiz threw down the conceptual gauntlet in very specific terms: "Are we feeling we are the salt and light of the world? Are we conscious of the moral and ethical role that the Gospel demands of us in society?", he asked the group. "Why have we not had more of an impact on a country that is plagued by violence, corruption, poverty, and inequality, etc.?" Ortiz challenged his colleagues to ask themselves to entertain the question of why fervent prayer alone had not saved the nation. "We continue to grabble with theories and practices of mission," he argued, "that reduce the Gospel to a spiritual force and leave aside the challenge to affect all dimensions of life" (Ortiz 2009: unpaginated). The conference attracted a wide variety of church leaders, representing some 400 different denominations. As one rural pastor plaintively called out from the audience, succinctly summarizing up Centro Esdras' challenge, "How many churches have we built? How many Bible studies, how many small groups? And yet this country still continues to get worse and worse. Isn't it time for us to ask if God wants us to do more?"[9]

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8 Turner uses this word to describe, "society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured undifferentiated *comitatus* [Latin: "retinue"] or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the authority of ritual authority."

9 Quote taken from fieldnotes at conference on July 29, 2009.

Marco Tulio Cajas, a well-known Guatemalan pastor, spoke to this question directly, explicitly critiquing the churches' "anti-society" discourse as both impeding the advance of the faith and as patently disingenuous. "We pray for the authorities in power, and yet we are contemptuous of public life and those who take part in it," he noted. "We need solid argumentation [for social engagement] and innovative ideas that will permit us to be more audacious and creative in the transformation of society." Cajas, too, called for what he termed a "theology of public life," wherein "the churches as community of faith, motivate, equip, and support their members to reinterpret public life and to act within it as agents of social and political transformation" (Cajas 2009: unpaginated).

Even as the conference generated enthusiasm among its participants, it did not transform Guatemalan Pentecostalism overnight. But it did help to coalesce social groups of like-minded pastors and other religious actors (such as faculty at the Guatemala City-based *Seminario Teológico Centroamericano*) by opening venues for communication that allowed them to safely explore new hermeneutics of social engagement and to consider new social forms that might pave the path to change. This process is of yet incomplete, but in the years since the conference took place, we can see a more expansive social hermeneutics has emerged in Guatemalan Pentecostalism in several key areas. Church efforts are most visible in those areas of need where the feeble Guatemalan state has failed to provide even basic services for its people and some, perhaps, have grown weary of waiting for the soteriological unfolding of the redemption.

4.3 Hermeneutics in action: Pentecostal social forms against violence

By way of example, Guatemalan sociologist Claudia Dary (2016) writes about the community campaigns against domestic violence conducted by the Iglesia de Dios Evangélio Completo (IDEC) (a "classical" Pentecostal denomination), demonstrating ways that the church has been particularly adept at developing new biblically based strategies by which women and men learn to cope with violence in the home. The IDEC's *Baja la Voz* (literally: "lower your voice") program both empowers women (and some men) *who belong to the church* to speak up against abuse, and for abusers to learn new ways to control their anger and increase respect for their partners, providing templates for what the church calls "biblical alternatives to *machismo*" (Dary 2016: 100).

Sociologist Robert Brenneman (2012) is among the most prominent scholars who has written about other Pentecostal social interventions that have met with success; Brenneman's research focuses on religious with programs among gang members. Although it is patently dangerous work, this type of ministry appeals to Pentecostals and *evangélicos* because they view gang violence as a "spiritual problem" best tackled by the church, rather than as a social or criminal problem that the state should address (but does not). As a social group, *evangélicos* are one of only a handful of social actors who are willing to take on the gangs, one of Central America's most urgent social problems. Church workers are usually respected mediators, to the extent that the gangs themselves take their efforts seriously.

Brenneman's work on Pentecostal ministries to gang members notes that genuine religious conversion is one of the only means by which young men are able to leave *la vida loca*; the only other exit from the gang is through death. In practical terms, this means a gang member must fully abandon his criminal past, eschew all contact with his former clique and homies, begin the process of removing tattoos, and adhere to standard *evangélico* behaviors such as not drinking alcohol and attending church services with regularity, often several times per week. As sociologist José Miguel Cruz observes: "The pious lifestyle that churches encourage lets gang members easily monitor their former members" and gangs expect former members to fully live up to the Evangelical lifestyle to which they have converted. When gangs determine that a former member is not sincerely committed to their new life, they promptly eliminate him, notifying the victim's pastor with the message: "This one didn't walk right" (quoted in Miller 2023: unpaginated).

Likewise, Pentecostal ministries have improved conditions for some in Guatemala's carceral hellscape – a dangerous and lawless system of prisons that criminologist Mark Fleischer has termed "warehouses of violence" (1989; O'Neill 2010a). By using strategies such as prayer, helping break addiction and bad habits, and teaching basic literacy and other life skills, prison ministers work to improve self-esteem and teach new technologies of self to prisoners, who become less violent while still incarcerated and are less prone to recidivism when they are released (cf. Johnson 2017). As one prison minister described his work: "My objective has always been to spread the word of God, but also to teach gang members good customs and habits, how to be good people, good sons and fathers, how to be good citizens." This approach simultaneously speaks to the Christian quest to find God through inspection of one's interior life, at the same time that it provides new and practical technologies

of self – soft skills – to help prisoners cope both in and outside the walls of prison (O'Neill 2010b).

As they learn an alternative to what is called in English "the thug life," Christian prisoners become part of new social forms that cohere and support them both while still in prison and once they are released. So committed are some of these groups that they police themselves while still in confinement, providing some modicum of security and order in Central America's notorious and functionally unregulated penal system, including Guatemala's El Pavón prison, one of the most lawless and dangerous such places in the world. As such, Christian prison groups – organically united by their shared conversion and sometimes united under the authority of a self-appointed incarcerated "pastor" – provide an alternative to the hierarchies of international gang and drug cartel members, extortionists, and "prison kings" that otherwise control virtually all aspects of men's lives in confinement.[10]

In short, "empowered" neo-Pentecostals have been increasingly effective in creating functional systems for improving education, security, and problems of everyday violence in places where other types of public authority, including the state, are precarious or even entirely absent. But even these successes carry with them some serious caveats. As evinced in O'Neill's work on Evangelical-run Guatemalan addiction centers, the state's abjuration of its own responsibility to provide proper care for addicts and the mentally ill opens the door wide for intentional or unintentional mistreatment when it hands them over to untrained church people, turning rehabilitation over to unregulated, unmonitored institutions, where care can range from clinically lax (again, relying mainly on prayer and tropes of redemption) to unscrupulous and dangerous (where, for example, patients are locked up and mistreated and hunted down if they leave the premises) (2019). It would also be possible, and probably fruitful, to discuss some very negative effects of Pentecostal social mobilization, for example, cases of vigilantism in parts of the country where the rule of law is largely absent that have resulted in the deaths of purported criminals without benefit of trail, or of rumors of financial ties between prominent national televangelists and the drug cartels, but these disturbing cases do not reflect the overall larger trajectory of Pentecostal life in contemporary Guatemala.

10 Cf. https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/the-prison-kings-of-guatemala/.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, Evangelical religion, especially in its majority form of Pentecostalism in the Central American nation of Guatemala, has undergone a tectonic epistemological shift from a post-temporal, apocalyptic orientation to one that is profoundly presentist and instrumentalist in its outlook. In specific terms, Pentecostals in recent decades have transitioned from an eschatological hermeneutics of separation from the world to one that embraces full-on social and political participation, cohering, in the process, into social forms that emphasize collective mobilization. This reflects a change in religious social forms and values that correspond to a shifting corpus of religious ideals and theologies. As these social relationships evolve, they change the role of the church – which previously prioritized insularity – to one of increased, outward-facing social engagement. As this evolution progresses, pastors retain charisma and sway, but the capacity building, self-realization, and leadership training that small groups nurture in congregants has made them into a social force that, over time, is beginning to chip away at the patterns of patriarchy and even authoritarianism that characterized earlier Pentecostalism.

In this milieu, we see that at least certain sectors of Pentecostalism have sacralized social values and aspirations that they heretofore perceived as secular, but which they now map onto a religious framework of understanding. It is not the allure of secular society that encourages Pentecostals to engage with the world, but rather its absence – the failure of secular modernity's 'enchantments' in modern Guatemala to provide sustenance for body *or* soul. I refer here to such things as basic public services, the rule of law, remediation programs to address poverty, violence; Pentecostals also identify as problematic the anomie that pushes young people towards drugs or gangs, for example. And yet, Pentecostal social engagement is very much on Pentecostalism's own terms, as secular social, tropes, and formulas for advancing the public good must be re-signified within a Pentecostal idiom to be acceptable, even legible, to them.

Pentecostal social mobilization holds great promise, but also certain dangers, as evinced by the role that *evangélicos* openly played in the nation's 2023 presidential campaign. In an attempt to marshal Evangelical votes, one of the leading candidates, Sandra Torres, chose an Evangelical pastor as her vice presidential running mate and adopted a morally conservative platform

that she that hoped would appeal to that constituency.[11] On the other, several Guatemalan Pentecostal televangelists produced a steady flow of negative social media against Arévalo, the progressive-moderate winning candidate, denouncing him as a "communist," and even an agent of Satan. The fact that this beleaguered candidate roundly won the election offers tells us that despite these efforts, *evangélicos*, who make up over forty percent of Guatemala's overall population, voted for him despite efforts by their institutional leadership to sway them otherwise.[12] This suggests that, while Evangelical organizations' organizational logic remains inchoate, the power of social forms – notably, the small groups that exist within the large churches and among which Arévalo enjoyed much larger support – were instrumental in determining the outcome.

Many scholars have argued that Pentecostalism's attraction to converts a generation ago was its ability to offer an "alternative imaginary" to a corrupt and violent world, a symbolic resistance that demanded to keep the world at arm's length and offer believers an orderly, meaningful life framed by a particular understanding of the nature of the Holy Spirit's presence and mandates. Yet as Pentecostalism in Central America matures, there is a small but growing number of cradle and second-generation *evangélicos* who are beginning to test the boundaries of old binaries. Even today, the social spaces that Pentecostals are willing to enter remain limited, and the new hermeneutics struggle to compete with the old: Pentecostalism remains divided into those who still wish to flee the world versus those who wish to scale the Seven Mountains. As recently as September 2022, for example, *evangélicos* gathered to pray to ask God to "fill in" a massive sinkhole that had formed in one of Guatemala's major highways, but they did not propose or support any material remedy to this basic infrastructural problem.[13] It remains to be seen just how much the human capital that Pentecostal churches cultivate in their members will translate into a more fungible social capital within society at large. If so, a new hermeneutics of social engagement will require a broad expansion on the Pentecostal prerogative to bring the world to the church, *en su manera*.

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11 Cf. https://apnews.com/article/guatemala-election-sandra-torres-74ce43addf2ec3f36f356fd034546cc0.

12 Cf. https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/guatemala/.

13 Cf. https://progressive.org/latest/other-americans-guatemala-religious-narco-state-abbott-091422/.

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