

## PENTECOSTALS AND POLITICS IN ARGENTINA: A QUESTION OF COMPATIBILITY?

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### I. INTRODUCTION

When Carlos Menem was elected president in Argentina in 1989, he was the first popularly elected president to succeed another popularly elected head of state from a different political party (Raul Alfonsín 1983–89) in the country. This was in itself a token of a new more democratic mentality in Argentina as well as a further step towards the consolidation of democratic (and Western) structures. Twelve years later the progress was interrupted by a politico-financial crisis. *El menemismo* was blamed for many, if not most, of the things that went wrong in the period leading up to crisis which escalated in 2001. Then, after a couple of turbulent years, Nestor Kirchner was elected president in 2003, and a period of steady economic growth and social reform commenced. The process of differentiation continued, which can best be observed in the ‘autonomization’<sup>1</sup> of the political, the juridical, and the religious spheres and of an increasingly important public sphere. Moreover, the role of the military, an important socio-political actor for several decades, was ‘harmonized’ with democratic rule. Conscription was abolished in 1994 and defense expenditures were down to 0.9 per cent of GDP in 2006 compared to 8 per cent in 1981 (Turner 2011:106). Finally, during the same period as these structural changes took place, Pentecostalism experienced a considerable growth. Although there are no reliable statistics on this, it is estimated that around 1980 approximately 2 per cent of the total population were Pentecostals, whereas 10 years later, they represented approximately 5-6 per cent. Today the corresponding figure is somewhere around 10 per cent.

How did Pentecostals approach this ‘new’ democratic public sphere? Before the 1980s, they constituted a marginal group in Argentine society, both in numerical and in political terms. As they have grown in numbers, their attitude towards society has changed. Whereas the pre-democratic marginal position fueled a negative dualism (‘the world’ as an evil place, to be avoided), the more integrated position from the late 1980s has propelled a more positive dualism (‘the world’ is still full of evil forces but they can now be

transformed). This positive dualism, which was first expressed in the Tommy Hicks campaigns in the 1950s, 'argentinized' by Omar Cabrera in the 1960s and 1970s, and which blossomed with Carlos Annacondia's and Hector Gimenez's evangelizing campaigns in the 1980s, has resulted in a more explicit focus on the evangelization of the 'multitudes' in big arenas, and in rallies and through mass media (*teleevangelistas*) and increased societal engagement. Leaving evangelization aside, my intention is to shed light on the increased Pentecostal presence as a public and political force, and on the political dimension of Argentine Pentecostalism. Three different Pentecostal political 'projects' or 'cases' will serve as the empirical basis for the discussion: (1) Attempts at establishing a political party in the early 1990s; (2) a conference in 2003 displaying an Evangelical response to neo-liberal globalization; and (3) an increased focus on certain values as the basis for political involvement from the early 2000s. Throughout the article I analyze these three 'projects' based on a general hypothesis concerning the relationship between two different modes of *communication*: a religious (Pentecostal) mode and a political one. The differences between these modes of communication need to be overcome. That is, the political mode needs to be *compatible* with the religious (Pentecostal) one in order to gain support from Pentecostal voters. Moreover, the political and religious must resonate with, and be legitimized as, religious (in scripture, tradition, authority). Hence, although several Pentecostal types of political involvement can be possible (or compatible) the religious 'trumps' the political. Furthermore, as the Pentecostals have grown in numbers, they constitute a more diverse group than before, religiously as well as politically. Have the problems of compatibility now been overcome with the understanding of *values* as the basis for Pentecostal involvement in political life? This is the main question I seek to address. The empirical data are made up of semi-structured interviews with central Pentecostal actors, Pentecostal literature and texts, Argentine and other academic literatures and excerpts from Pentecostal and other mass media. A lot of the data have been retrieved from the Internet and much information has also been obtained during field trips to Argentina.

Before turning to the analysis of the political 'projects', 'experiments', or 'cases', a brief presentation of Pentecostalism in general, and in Argentina in particular, will be provided. Then follows a discussion of the three political 'experiments' and the article concludes with a reflection on the route ahead for Pentecostal politics in Argentina.

## II. PENTECOSTALISM

Since the first 'outpouring of the Spirit' in a poor neighbourhood in Los Angeles in 1906, in what has been called the Azusa Street revival, Pentecostalism has experienced a tremendous growth. Although the remarkable story of this form of Christianity commenced in a modest locality, the urge to spread the message was already from its infancy an explicit trademark of its creed. As early as 1910, the Pentecostal magazine *Confidence* claimed to be in circulation in 46 countries (Anderson 2007:12). Since then, the number of followers has skyrocketed, and today maybe as many as 500 million people can be counted as adherents (Kay 2009:12–13).

In 1909, the American-Italians Louis Francescon, Giacomo Lombardi and Lucia Menna were the first Pentecostals to come to Argentina (Sarracco 1989:43). They were followed by the Canadian Alice Woods and the Norwegian Berger Johnsen the following year. Similar to the early years in a majority of the countries where Pentecostals evangelized, the Argentine Pentecostals constituted rather small communities during their first 50–60 years.<sup>2</sup> Simultaneously with the process of redemocratization from the early 1980s, however, a revival nick-named *iglecrecimiento* (church-growth), commenced and today maybe as many as 10 per cent of the population are Pentecostals.

Because of the large scale of the Pentecostal movement, it is also very diverse in its contents and expressions. However, some main 'themes' can be detected, like baptism in the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues (glossolalia), healing, prophecies and conversion (to be 'born again'). It has been called a religion of 'encounter' with divine forces – particularly the Holy Spirit (Warrington 2008), a paradoxical religion (Droogers 1998) and a religion of 'experience' (Aasmundsen 2003). Exorcism is another central element within most Pentecostal congregations. In Argentina the 'exorcism of evil spirits' has not only been applied to people, but also to places and institutions, particularly through the Spiritual Warfare of Carlos Annacondia. In addition to these characteristics, Pentecostalism is an evangelizing religion with a global and ultimate goal: the message is for everyone everywhere and it is all-embracing in the sense that it requires of the believer a full adaptation (conversion) to the Pentecostal 'habitus'. Its tremendous growth, particularly in Latin America, Africa and Asia, has been the subject of research from an increasing number of scholars from various disciplines who are trying to grasp the contents and nature of its success.

Argentine sociologist Hilario Wynarczyk is occupied with the 'problem' of defining who is who in the Evangelical-Protestant family. Referring to conditions in Argentina, he claims that Evangelicals and Protestants constitute a field (*Campo Evangélico*), and that the different branches represent different

interests, like a in a field of military forces (2009:16–17). According to Wynarczyk there are two main groups ‘fighting’ in this field: Biblical conservatives and historical liberationists (2009:39).<sup>3</sup>

In Spanish, the term *Evangélicos* refers to a wide range of Protestants. Although it does not correspond exactly to the English word *Evangelicals*, some prefer to use this term, like for instance Paul Freston, who seems to include all kinds and forms of Latin American Protestantism into Evangelicalism (2008). Timothy Samuel Shah claims that “Evangelicalism in its spirit-filled Pentecostal form has proven particularly contagious, constantly spreading across other well defined ecclesiastical borders” (2008:xi). In many parts of Latin America (but only rarely in Argentina) the Pentecostals and Evangelicals are referred to as *Cristianos*, whereas the Catholics are called *Católicos*. However, ‘members’ of the Charismatic Renewal Movement within the Catholic Church may be called *Cristianos Católicos*. The derogatory term *sectas* has also been used, particularly by the Catholic Church and the secular media, in order to describe the Pentecostal movement as something different from a ‘true’ religion. Finally, as was the case among Argentine scholars when they first started writing about Pentecostals in the early 1990s, they were (and still are) seen, by some, as a group who belongs to the category of New Religious Movements (NRM) (Soneira 2005; Frigerio 1993), and even as a new social movement (Marostica 1994).

Many Protestants in Latin America have been heavily influenced by the Pentecostal growth, and have to a certain extent been ‘Pentecostalized’. They may have adopted one or several elements of Pentecostal praxis or attitudes, such as proselytizing, prophecies, healing or, they join Pentecostals in umbrella-organizations, evangelizing campaigns and religio-political rallies. Much of the same can be said about the Charismatic Renewal Movement (CRM) within the Catholic Church, as well as Charismatics within ‘main stream’ Protestant churches. These are sometimes seen as Catholic and traditional Protestant counterparts to Pentecostals, because of the shared focus on spiritual ‘gifts’, like prophecies and healing (Day 2003:93). Since the Catholic Charismatics are a group within the Catholic Church, it is difficult to know how many they are. Some estimates suggest that, out of the approximately 450 million Catholics in Latin America, there are around 80–100 million Charismatics, whereas among the Protestants, as many as 90 per cent may be Pentecostals, depending on the definition (Adherents.com). Traditional Pentecostalism (from 1906 through the 1950s), Charismatic Renewal Movement (from the 1960s) and neo-Charismatic renewal (from the late 1970s) have been portrayed as three ‘waves’ of “one basic move of the Holy Spirit of massive worldwide proportions comprising 523 million affiliated church members” (Kay 2009:13). However, there is one aspect that separates,

or has until very recently separated, the CRM from the Pentecostals, and that is their respective approaches to the 'other' and to the 'world'. Pentecostals direct their evangelizing efforts towards all non-Pentecostals and, as such, are pursuing the conversion of as many as possible, whereas the CRM is more like a home mission, a renewal within former Catholic areas, and an attempt to stave off Protestant competition.

### III. PENTECOSTALISM AND POLITICS IN ARGENTINA

The politics of Protestantism in general and Latin American Pentecostalism in particular has been the subject of debate over a long period of time. Ideas of a link between Protestantism and democracy goes back, at least to Alexis de Tocqueville's theory that postulates a connection between the free, egalitarian Anglo-Saxon Protestants and democracy in America (USA). Max Weber's theory about a transition between Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism has influenced social scientists (and others) for more than a century. Christian Lalive d'Épinay and Emilio Willems, and in more recent years, David Martin and Paul Freston, have followed up the discussions, focusing on the Latin American context. David Martin emphasizes how Protestantism is, in his opinion, an anti-hierarchical religion where "like-minded" individuals constitute a kind of egalitarian community. This, he claims, is more modern and democratic than the hierarchical and absolutist 'old-fashioned' Catholic Hispanic culture, which has influenced Latin-American societies, at least until the growth of Protestantism started to have an impact, not only 'religiously', but also politically and socially (Martin 1990). Paul Freston also observes that Latin American growth in Evangelical Protestantism, and particularly Pentecostalism is coinciding with processes of democratization and re-democratization (2008:3). At the same time, he elaborates on the democracy-protestant theory by showing how the beginning of Pentecostal growth, in many areas, took place during military dictatorships, i.e. before democracy was installed. Furthermore, he also observes how Pentecostal political behavior is not necessarily, as in USA, taking a (value) conservative route, but rather goes in many different directions (2008:3-4). Contemplating the social alienation of a great number of Latin American Pentecostals, Juan Sepúlveda highlights how a high percentage of them are poor and marginalized in the first place. Furthermore, he compares with the base ecclesiastical communities and claims that: "for both movements, salvation is not a purely immaterial question; it is a concrete reality in the here and now of life" (1991:172-173).<sup>4</sup> In Argentina, Fortunato Mallimaci and María Soledad Catoggio have emphasized the role and relationship between the Argentine culture, the state, the Catholic Church, the 'religions' and society. Thus the complexity of a particular context, here the nation, is enhanced in

opposition to more stereotypical labels given to various countries (USA as the modern yet religious exception), regions (Western Europe as the ‘secular’ exception in the world), and religions (Islam as different from all other religions, hence exceptional). But is not Argentina also exceptional, Mallimaci asks? (2008:117). Catoggio, on the other hand, focuses on how the *Registro Nacional de Cultos*, established during the last military dictatorship (1976-83), was intended to control dissident groups, like threatening non-Catholics (2008:114). After democracy was re-installed in 1983, the register became a main issue in the struggle for religious freedom and equality in Argentina and has also been important as a starting point for increased Pentecostal political involvement. It is to an analysis of this type of involvement that we now turn.

#### IV. THREE POLITICAL “EXPERIMENTS” OR CASES

By discussing three explicit cases of Pentecostal political projects, we will illustrate that Pentecostalism, once a marginal and isolated religion, is now becoming an integrated part political life in Argentina. Moreover, this is in line with a global trend where *Mision Integral* (evangelization and social commitment), *holism* (God-in-everything) and a *positive dualism* (the ‘other’ - everyone is convertible) is becoming ever more important.

First, I will look at the attempt to establish a political party in the early 1990s. Then follows an analysis of a conference and a book, *Las Iglesias evangélicas dicen basta* (The Evangelical Churches Says Enough) published in the wake of the economical-political crisis in 2001. Finally, we will reflect upon the Pentecostals’ political mobilization in the struggle against same-sex marriages and abortion and in favour of an increased focus on particular values as a foundation for the transformation of society. Before embarking on the analysis in a more thorough way, my hypothesis is that the two first *political projects* were not compatible with the *religious project of the majority of Pentecostals*, whereas the third and more recent ‘case’ may reveal how the ‘gap’ between the religious and the political is being bridged through a convergence or adaptation of the religious communication to the communication in the political sphere in a way that gives the political involvement religious legitimacy.

#### V. THE 1990S: A POLITICAL PARTY

Some Pentecostals (mainly pastors) created a political party, *Movimiento Cristiano Independiente* (the Independent Christian Movement) in the 1990s. The party did not become the success its founders wanted it to be. Argentine anthropologist Daniel Míguez contextualizes the religio-political climate in the 1990s in Argentina as follows: Since democracy was re-installed in the beginning of the 1980s, the country witnessed growing political freedom and

an increase in religious liberty that occurred in two ways: first, the prohibition to proselytize was removed and second, “people acquired a more developed consciousness of the importance of civil rights – especially freedom of speech and thought – [Cheresky 1992] and thus felt more free to enter dissident religious minorities as Pentecostals” (2000:3). As considerable numbers of people converted, Pentecostals became more visible in the public sphere and soon came to attract the negative attention of the ‘established’ media and the Catholic Church. A ‘campaign’ against the *sectas* was launched and a ‘law of cults’ was promoted by “certain senators and deputies connected to the Catholic Church” (Ibid) with the aim of restricting the religious freedom of minorities and particularly Pentecostals. The negative attitude displayed by the Argentine establishment (the Catholic Church, the leading political parties, the media) reflects some of the motivations Pentecostals had to enter politics.

According to Míguez, towards the end of the 1980s, the Argentine people grew tired of politicians and corruption. Pentecostal leaders of second rank hoped to capitalize on the atmosphere of discontent in elections and made an attempt at creating the first political party in 1991. An ecumenical group of Baptists, Pentecostals and Plymouth Brethren stood behind.<sup>5</sup> The first attempt was a failure, but in 1993 the party presented candidates in the national elections. 80,000 votes out of 2,000,000 was not enough to get a single candidate elected to office and Míguez asks why, as in Peru, Brazil and Central America, “brothers don’t vote for brothers?” To help him, Míguez operates with a list of five factors to explain the Pentecostal political ambiguity: (1) Pentecostals’ main aim and motivation is evangelization, (2) Pentecostal leaders seek churchly advancement through political success, (3) because of (1) and (2) their relationship to politics is pragmatic and instrumental, (4) Pentecostal followers, and to a lesser extent leaders, have secular political identities, and finally (5) “...Pentecostal doctrine is malleable and subject to *ad hoc* interpretation” (2000:2). According to Míguez, combinations of these factors explain the ambiguous political position of Pentecostals and add evidence to the theory of ‘paradoxical behavior’.<sup>6</sup>

By taking a closer look at the factors in Míguez’s list, I make the claim that none of these factors, whichever the combination, can really support his hypothesis. The first factor stands out as the essence – the aim and motivation – that which ‘really’ concerns the Pentecostals. When this motivation lies behind ‘everything’, you need a factor to contradict it in order to support the theory of ‘paradoxical behaviour’. None of the other four factors qualifies in this respect. Depending on how one understands or defines religion, it would of course be possible to consider the possibility that, although the religious person does not explicitly state it, the Pentecostals’ main aim and motivation is to attain earthly power, whether by the instrumental use of ‘religious’ or ‘political’ means. I

agree with Míguez that the main aim and motivation of the Pentecostals is evangelization. But there is also a clue to why they have problems with succeeding in politics: they experience politics as not being compatible with Pentecostalism.

The second factor can be explained by the fact that churchly advancement is a central part to, at least, the mid-segments within the Pentecostal organizations. However, to display the will to work hard, to want to do better, to let the spirit work fully with you and to seek power with 'him' is based on Pentecostal 'doctrine' and is expected of aspiring members of the organization – as part of what this religion is about. The struggle between second-rank leaders of Pentecostal churches to occupy leading positions in the political party was one of the reasons why the enterprise failed according to Míguez. However, it is really difficult to see how this would contradict the other factors, as such competition is expected to be found in all political parties.

The third factor, that the Pentecostal approach to politics is pragmatic and instrumental because of the first and the second factors, is highly dubious. Yes, it may have been pragmatic then, but that was also the main reason why it failed, because Pentecostal politics must be anchored in the non-pragmatic: the no-negotiable Bible. Míguez points out how, in the 1990s, the political atmosphere in Argentina was characterized by growing corruption and the two dominant political parties turning into 'political machines'. Then the political system itself orchestrated the rules of the game and many Pentecostals were converts with a pre-conversion political history. For example, some former policemen, who had participated in the repressive task-force during the dictatorship and converted to Pentecostalism after the return of democracy, were among the Pentecostal party leaders (1999:61). They had, according to another group of leaders, "not really repented from the role played in the violent years, and during harsh discussions had remembered the 'good old times' in a humorous, but also threatening tone" (2000:5). The other group opposed them and pre-Pentecostal disagreements became an obstacle for the party. With regard to Míguez's fourth factor, secular political identities (inherited from their 'previous' lives), has more to do with the historical context than with pragmatism and instrumentalism, that is, it was in that specific period of rapid Pentecostal growth and particular political situation that the Pentecostals were pragmatic to a certain degree, but it is difficult to see how this is contradictory to any of the other factors.

Actually, the schism between people caused by included 'secular' ideologies and the fact that it caused severe problems, could lead to another conclusion: that they were not that pragmatic after all. The instrumentality involved in creating a political party was not enough to prevent ideological

differences from ruining the political project. Anyway, whether it was paradoxes, inherited ideologies from pre-conversion lives, or just a deficient political platform, the project of creating a political party resulted in failure. I asked Norberto Saracco, one of the leading Pentecostal pastors and a high-ranking member of The Christian Alliance of Evangelical Churches in Argentina (*Alianza Cristiana de las Iglesias Evangélicas de la República Argentina*, ACIERA) why the political project did not succeed back then. His answer was: “it could not work because there (in the political sphere) you have to negotiate – and how to negotiate this”, steering my look at the Bible? (Saracco, interviewed 2010). It was a tough lesson to learn that political life was full of negotiations, compromises and practical deals, and many Pentecostals got their fingers burnt from that experience. Cesar Degarbardian, editor of *El Puente*, a leading Argentinian magazine for more than 25 years, claimed that the Pentecostals who started the political party “only represented themselves” and therefore did not have the support of the Pentecostal ‘movement’. In my opinion, the political party project in the 1990s went wrong because the party’s traditional center-right conservative political program had no religiously based legitimacy; it was not anchored in scripture, doctrine, tradition or authority and hence lacked compatibility.

## VI. A RELIGIO-POLITICAL REACTION TO THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS IN 2001

In 1999, more than 100,000 Pentecostals demonstrated in favour of religious equality in downtown Buenos Aires. The Pentecostals, encouraged by boosted self-esteem, and at the same time dissatisfied by the lack of any concrete results in the struggle, once again mobilized in 2001. This second demonstration was meant to be a continuation of the struggle for religious freedom and equality, but the political and economic crisis building up in the autumn of 2001 was so severe that the slogans and focus changed in the last minute. Instead of a rally for religious equality it turned out to be a demonstration of solidarity with the suffering Argentines. The speeches and prayers for the ‘people’ may have given the Pentecostals a stronger sense of being integrated and accepted partners in Argentine society than ever before. The political consequences of the rally and the crisis itself, on behalf of the Pentecostal community, were both direct and indirect. In the following we will analyze a reaction to the crisis in the form of a conference and a book.

In 2003, the Latin American council of Churches (*Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias*, CLAI) hosted a conference in Buenos Aires where the impact of (neoliberal) globalization on the Latin American societies was the main theme. Although this was a Latin American conference, the Argentine ‘case’ was high up on the agenda, and many participants were from

Argentina. In 2004, the book titled *Las Iglesias evangélicas dicen basta* was published, and we will discuss some of the main thoughts presented in the book and why it (and the conference) did not influence the Pentecostal community in any considerable way. When I asked Cesar Degarbardian in an interview, November 2010, about the influence of this conference and project on the Argentine Pentecostal community he answered “*ninguna, ninguna ... ninguna*” (none, none ... none).

Why was this the case? In order to make an attempt at answering that question, we have to start by looking more closely at the contents of some of the papers that were presented at the conference and later reproduced in the abovementioned book. In the introduction, Ángel Luis Rivera Agosto summarizes the contents of the book as a collection of diagnostic experiences, biblical-theological reflection, pastoral and prophetic, and a search for alternatives to neoliberal globalization by the Evangelical Churches of Latin America and the Caribbean (2004:7). More than 100 leaders from churches all over the continent in addition to participants from Europe, Asia and Africa were present at the conference. Moreover, this continental consultation was linked to the process/project called ‘Economic Justice’, initiated by the World Council of Churches in 2001. The main focus was on Argentina and Brazil and, still according to Agosto, the main aim of the publication of the book was to provide the religious leadership with an orientation of the implications of the socioeconomic system and how they could “use their voices with Christian knowledge, sincerity and authority” (2004:9). As a sort of ‘precursor’ to the later Pentecostal focus on certain *values* as a central element for political involvement, Agosto states that before conducting a socioeconomic analysis one needs to start by recognizing the values that Christians can be identified by.

The book and conference were thus intended as a guideline and a way to learn about a socioeconomic reality and how to deal with that reality from an Evangelical point of view. As an introduction to the Argentine section, Horacio Verbitsky was invited to present the text: “The socioeconomic reality of Argentina” (2004:13). Verbitsky is a well-known journalist and author of several books on the last military dictatorship in Argentina and reputed for his particularly outspoken criticism of the role of the Catholic Church during the ‘dirty war’. He actually characterizes the military dictatorship as an attempt at creating a form of “national Catholicism” (2004:15). Verbitsky could be seen by some of the members of the Pentecostal community as a rather controversial figure, particularly by those who do not sympathize with policies that could be labeled as leftist, or those who seek more harmonious relations with the Catholic Church. Furthermore, this ‘problem’ has also to do with the political left’s traditional liberal stance on value-conservative issues. Whereas Pentecostals and socialists have in common a concern for the poor and social

justice, they do not (traditionally) share values concerning family issues, abortion and same-sex marriages. Herein lies an important clue to understanding Pentecostal political behavior.

Verbitsky begins by acknowledging the Evangelical communities' stance as defenders of the rights of 'the people' during the dictatorship, in stark contrast to the Catholic and Jewish leaderships, who he claims vacillated between panic and collaboration with the military. It should be mentioned that only a small segment of the Evangelical/Pentecostal<sup>7</sup> members of The Argentine Federation of Evangelical Churches (*Federación Argentina de Iglesias Evangélicas*, FAIE) participated actively in the opposition (Andiñach and Bruno 2001:27). The FAIE, being the organization of the so-called 'historical' Protestant churches, also has among its members, people or groups who represent a Protestant form of liberation theology.

Néstor Míguez, Argentine theologian and professor at the Department for Biblical Studies at the Supreme Evangelical Institute for Theological Studies (*el Instituto Superior Evangélico de Estudios Teológicos*, ISEDET) in Buenos Aires, presented the chapter/paper: "Empire and Power from a Biblical Perspective" (2004:55–60). In what could be called a socio-theological approach, Míguez sets out to describe globalization, not as a new phenomenon but rather as something similar to what has occurred in the early history of mankind and described in Genesis 10 (Nimrod and the building of the tower of Babel). According to Míguez, there is a lesson to be learned from this story, one that relates directly to the project of building the 'total market', which constitutes the core of contemporary (neoliberal) globalization. A comprehension of this requires (theological) understanding and biblically inspired anti-hegemonic action. In Genesis 10:5 it is told how Noah's descendants had emigrated to all lands and shores and that they spoke different languages. Míguez observes that this was the first known interruption of men, through the formation of a pluralistic world. This was a good thing, according to God's plan.

Then followed the second interruption, when Nimrod, the first man to rule a great 'empire' on earth, set out to build the tower of Babel and by so doing, challenged the power of God. But it was not the building of the tower in itself that offended God. The fact that the peoples of the earth were evolving towards one empire, one ruler and one language was also wrong. That was the first attempt at global control, an act condemned by God, and now the same thing is happening again, with neoliberal capitalism as the main vehicle. What Míguez is saying is that the 'punishment' of God through the dispersion of the peoples of the earth, and the confusion of languages after the building of the tower of Babel, was not actually a punishment. He observes that nowhere in the Bible is this referred to as a punishment and should not be understood as such;

it should instead be understood as an act of liberation by God. This is why God descended to set free and not to punish. If he only wanted the latter he would not need to descend. “Behind Nimrod is the globalization project” and “Behind the Divine *Descent* is the project of possibilities, of diverse identities, of the construction of legitimate and lawful humans” (2004:58). This way of understanding power is a recurrent theme of the entire Bible, according to Míguez.

To understand the conference and the (lack of) influence on Pentecostal politics, I think it is important to observe and recognize the socio-political climate at the time. The 1990s had been a decade of neoliberal policies and privatization in keeping with IMF-policy and the Washington consensus, followed by the chaotic period from 2001 to 2003. Towards the end of the Menem era, the most severe economic decline since the military dictatorship produced a kind of mental fatigue in the population. Many saw this as an omen, a proof of their lack of abilities to ‘make the country work’. Many were angry and fled the country to get relief or to escape with ‘their’ money. The economic crisis added fuel to theories such as the one presented by Verbitsky above: the oligarchy was no longer Argentine and therefore had no national obligations, but was now part of a global bourgeoisie: i.e. they no longer had affinities to the Argentine nation, economy and people.

The conference and the book could best be understood as a *reaction*, one of frustration and anger, and an attempt at finding something that could provide hope and change for those segments of the evangelical community who had a history of socio-theological thinking, and thus were predisposed for an alternative ideology. It seems that the religio-political contents of the conference were not compatible with the religious project of most Pentecostals. The conference was initiated by CLAI, an organization marginalized by the Pentecostal revival in the previous two decades. With the support of the now dominating organizations ACIERA, FAIE and the Pentecostal Evangelic Confraternity Federation (*Federacion Confraternidad Evangélica Pentecostal*, FECEP), the conference could have made a considerable impact, but then again it might have moved in a different direction. Neither ACIERA, nor FECEP had much experience and training in socio-theological matters, and were still more concerned with the struggle for religious equality. Influenced by the crisis or not, their members seem to have taken a different route politically: The crisis and the subsequent experience of social responsibility strengthened integration and participation in social and political activities. In spite of the large number of participants, the conference was a marginal project to begin with as far as the majority of Pentecostals was concerned. The main reason why the project lacked compatibility with the Pentecostal project, was that it was not based

strongly enough on the right values. In addition, the political consequences of the statements made at the conference were too radical.

## VII. TOWARD 'VALUES' AS THE BASIS FOR PENTECOSTAL POLITICS

*A la hora de votar, debemos orar y pensar.  
(At the time of voting, we should pray and think)*

Before the election, in October 2011, ACIERA posted this slogan on its web-site (quoted above). The members were encouraged not only to *pray*, but also to *think*, now that the elections were coming up. This short sentence may sum up the Pentecostal position or attitude towards politics in 2011. Praying is no longer sufficient and the need to think and act accordingly, illustrates how the Pentecostals have become a more integrated community in Argentine society. They accept the political institutions and 'understand' that they have to 'play the game' to win their battles. In the call to their members, ACIERA chooses a cautious path and carefully presents formulations meant to influence people to vote in a particular way, while at the same time respecting individual choices as well as not offending the denominational and 'individualistic' traditions of the Pentecostals. In the following section we shall see that many Pentecostals now find their way into political engagement through a social commitment based on certain values they consider themselves to represent: honesty, sincerity, trustworthiness (the Pentecostal habitus) on the one hand, and, pro-life, anti-homosexuality, pro-family (Gods natural order) on the other.

The 1990s was a period of consolidation for the Pentecostal community, in particular through the struggle for religious freedom and equality. The exposure in public spaces and public spheres culminated with the demonstrations at the Obelisk of Buenos Aires in 1999 and 2001.<sup>8</sup> However, from 2001 onwards, the unity in the Pentecostal community that is tested when the struggle for religious equality is prolonged and the focus on values reveals differences, particularly between the FAIE, on the one hand, and ACIERA and FECEP on the other. I will argue that by basing politics on these *values*, Argentine Pentecostals are creating a political platform that is *compatible* with their religion: policies based on these values are policies based on Pentecostalism. The understanding of distinct Pentecostal values as a prerequisite for political engagement had been important also in the 1990s (Wynarczyk 2009), particularly among second-rank leaders who instrumentally sought political power in order to increase religious power. But from the 2000s, these values have become not only a prerequisite for political endeavors, but more explicitly *the* basis for social commitment. One can distinguish between two types of values: values that reflect particular attitudes the Pentecostals as Pentecostals contribute with in the political sphere: Honesty, Identity and

Commitment (Valoresparamipais 2010), and specific values of concern for society like core-family, pro-life and anti-homosexuality.

The maneuvering in the political sphere, based on these values, is not only an Argentine Pentecostal experience. Rather it can be observed from the Pentecostal presence on a global scale. Drawing on the liberalism-communitarianism distinction, the Pentecostals are mainly to be found in the liberal sector but with distinct communitarian traits; they pray for the conversion of the individual, work for the core-family and live for the transformation of society and the second coming of Christ.

ACIERA's text is a message to all 'members' of the Pentecostal community in Argentina. Moreover, the members of ACIERA are addressed as integrated citizens and members of the wonderful people of the country.<sup>9</sup> The appeal to the Pentecostals as integrated members is an important sign of the notion of *belonging* in a larger society that is not, as in the days of Annacondia, filled with evil forces and bad spirits. The borders between heaven and hell have been moved from a physical immanence on the Argentine soil to a symbolic place, not as obviously located and conspicuous to the eye as it once was for many Pentecostals. Moreover, the new attitudes towards politics illustrate the processes of transformation from a negative to a positive dualism. As mentioned above, the processes towards a positive, or integrated, dualism started with the campaigns of Tommy Hicks in the 1950s, then in the open style and attitude of Omar Cabrera in the 1970s, and finally with Carlos Annacondia's 'spiritual warfare' in the 1980s. This first form of positive dualism was, however, first and foremost a revolution of evangelization methods. From the 1990s, this positive dualism started influencing the attitudes and approaches towards the juridical and political spheres, and from the 2000s Pentecostals became more visible in the public sphere(s).

The difference between a positive dualism, focusing on evangelization methods (outsider-perspective), and a positive dualism focusing on politics and public life (insider-perspective) is in an interesting way illustrated in an interview with Annacondia in El Puente, in April 2009. After a short presentation of him, as "the most famous and influential Argentina Preacher" (Annacondia 2009:39), it is said that he is invited to talk about the worldwide economic crisis, among other issues, and the first question concerns what he thinks are the causes of the global crisis? "I think that the times are accelerating, the coming of Christ too" (Annacondia 2009:38), he answers, before continuing with a description of how the Bible is real and is preaching to all nations that the end will come as the Lord has promised. Annacondia claims that the crisis is not only economical, but moral and violent too, and this is all because people do not follow 'Him'. "This happens as a consequence of sin, this happens because of disobedience and ambition". The answer to the

misery is God: “it is not a political plan [...] the important thing is that God provides the fruit, which causes the seed to grow”<sup>10</sup>(ibid). Hence, confronted with, what many would call, a question about politics, Annacondia provides a ‘religious’ answer. To him, prayer and evangelization are still enough. He is not, as such, concerned with ‘thinking’ as ACIERA’s text is encouraging. Prayer, faith and conversion are still sufficient, and Annacondia clearly has not left the positive dualism of the 1980s, he is still an outsider in the sense that evangelization is the main answer.

In another interview in *Pulso Cristiano* (Saracco 2008), Pastor Norberto Saracco, answers questions about Pentecostals and their relations with society in general, as well as about their relations with other religious groups (mainly Catholics). Saracco is the founder of a faculty of theology in Argentina, the FIET<sup>11</sup>, member of CRECES (*Comuni3n Renovada de Evang3licos y Cat3licos en el Esp3ritu Santo*), and Latin-American coordinator of the global Evangelical/Charismatic/Pentecostal network called the Lausanne Movement. He is also one of the leaders of the Council of Pastors in Buenos Aires. The council consists of around 350 Pentecostal pastors who meet regularly to discuss various large and small problems and issues (Interview with Saracco, October 2010). When asked what the Pentecostal movement in Argentina looks like today he answers: “The question that everyone is asking: We grew, but there is no social transformation” (Saracco 2008:3). Elaborating on this he states: “We thought that social transformation began with politics [ ] but we have rejected the ABC of the Evangelical, which is transformed lives”. He further claims that it is in politics (and Congress) that one thinks that by changing laws one can change persons. It is important to remember that Saracco is talking to a Pentecostal audience when he is doing an interview in a Pentecostal magazine. The very motto of the umbrella organization, ACIERA, where he is a leading member is: “Pentecostalism as the basis for the transformation of the individual, the family, and society”. In the end, it is conversion and faith that constitute the basis for the transformation of society, and to believe that some Christians in politics represent the Pentecostals is “farfetched, it’s crazy, it could never work”, Saracco told me referring to the Pentecostal political parties in the 1990s. “The Church has to serve all kinds of Pentecostals, and the Church does not have an ideology”, he continued. However, Saracco is of the opinion that “the Church has political implications”, and therefore: “should work politically as well”. “The Church is open and does not have a political ideology, whereas the political parties are closed”, Saracco stated before adding that “politicians must negotiate, whereas the Church has principles”. “The Church cannot negotiate, but at the same time must serve all. Pentecostals are religiously open and at the same time firm” (Saracco in interview, October 2010). What one senses from these statements,

interpreted in relation with ACIERA's official announcements, is a positive dualism where the 'religious' and the 'political' are not cut off from one another any longer, but still represents different 'worlds'. The statements also reflect the difference in communication that constitutes the different spheres. The communication in the democratic political sphere is directed at power, influence and re-election. Negotiations and building of coalitions are paramount for political success. The Pentecostal communication is directed at encounters and experiences with divine powers, at Spiritual Warfare, at Evangelization, and at the transformation of the world before the second coming of Christ. The 'challenge' for those who think that the transformation of the individual, the family and society are prerequisites for the return of Christ, in order to 'colonize' the political sphere is to make it compatible with the Pentecostal sphere.

What Saracco is saying is that one should never confuse the fact that Pentecostal faith is more important than politics. However, through his work in various organizations he is very engaged in ecumenical work, occupied with the fact that the Pentecostals have grown but have very little social impact. Finally, through ACIERA in particular, he is displaying an 'understanding' of the fact that, although he says in the interview above that politicians and Congress think they can change a person by changing the law, he also want people to both think and pray, because elections and politics *matter*. Saracco is not only concerned with Evangelization as it was done before, but he also wants to see results here and now. Saracco's positive dualism is not like Annacondia's, he is more of an 'insider' in Argentine society and, is in a way closer to the *Misión Integral* suggested by Rene Padilla in the 1960-70s (Padilla 2012).

ACIERA's text continues by affirming that the organization does not do party politics nor make agreements with particular political forces or parties. This statement is meant to secure that the Pentecostals maintain their religious freedom and a clear distance to formal politics. However, it is another matter if some particular Pentecostals want to go political. That might work as long as the political platform is compatible with the religious platform. The ACIERA actually supports those, who on their own, want to enter the political sphere, a reflection of the 'new' attitude and understanding of the importance of political decisions for vital matters in society.

So what was at stake in the 2011 elections? Was it social policies, the eradication of poverty, socialism vs. liberalism? No, the issue that was considered as the most important was the proposal for the de-penalization of abortion. Everyone was urged to reflect upon this before casting the vote, find out where the legislators stood on this issue and act accordingly. The time of the 'glossolalic ostrich'<sup>12</sup> is over. Now the Pentecostals need to learn from what

happened when the senate passed the bill that legalized same-sex marriages: it is the legislators who make the final decision.

Hence ACIERA stated: “only with our intelligent vote can we prevent a new law”,<sup>13</sup> thus appealing to the intellect and not only to emotions. *Cortemos Boleta*<sup>14</sup> if we do not find proper candidates, the text finishes, exposing the sincerity of the message. ACIERA’s call illustrates some aspects of this, to many Pentecostals, ‘new’ attitude towards politics in particular and society in general. First, particular values are the most important issues to deal with. These constitute the foundation for the transformation of society and will ‘trump’ other issues in future elections. Second, the Pentecostal community regards itself as an integrated part of Argentine society, very different from their self-understanding some 15 years ago. Globalization of the Euro-American model has made room for them to grow and they feel part of a new democratic national context. Third, since their growth to a certain degree has stopped, they seek out new arenas of influence. The struggle for religious freedom and equality is meant to secure the opening of new fields for domestic and international evangelization: the transformation of the individual. The struggle for values will secure the family as the core unit of society: the transformation of the family. Through a multi-directional approach to evangelization, Ventana 4-14 and 10-40<sup>15</sup>, the struggle for religious equality and finally, with the entering of the public and political spheres with a ‘package of values’ as a basis for their political platform, the Pentecostals seek to continue their growth and finally transform society.

### VIII. AN IDEOLOGY OF VALUES?

In recent years, Pentecostals have joined or supported various political coalitions and initiatives. An example is the *Evangelista K*, Pentecostals that support Cristina Kirchner through the Party for the People (*Partido por la gente*) also affiliated with the Transversal front (*Frente transversal*). In the election of 2011, ACIERA, in an attempt at getting their members to support what it considered to be the best alternative, presented many ‘good’ candidates from various coalitions and parties. Guillermo Prein, leading pastor of one of Buenos Aires’ mega-churches *Centro Cristiano Nueva Vida*, with more than 30,000 members, argued that no umbrella-organization should tell anyone how they should vote and no one should act as if they represented the Pentecostal community (Prein 2010). Prein is an outspoken voice in the Pentecostal community, with strong opinions on the role of the Catholic Church (Prein 2012) and, he has also criticized Cynthia Hotton’s proposal for a new *ley de cultos* - law on cults and religions (Prein 2010).

Cynthia Hotton, daughter of Arturo Hotton, one of the founders of the Pentecostal political initiative in 1991, has founded Values for My Country

(*Valores Para Mi País*, VPMP). She was originally affiliated with center-right politician Mauricio Macri and was elected a legislator when she founded the political party in 2009. Hotton has been active with regard to political issues like the mentioned law on cults and religions, the struggle against same-sex marriages and the pro-life (anti-abortion) campaign initiated to stop the proposed legalization of abortion. She has a typical middle-class background and is supported by Claudio Freidzon, leading pastor in the upper-middle class *Iglesia Rey de Reyes*. On the website the VPMP presents itself as a group composed of various people with the common aim of constructing a society based on values (Valoresparamipais 2010).

Hotton explains the initiative in the following manner: “VPMP is a space which unites Christians who consider that the defense of life, family and the values should be present in Argentine politics” (Hotton in Pulso Cristiano nr. 149). Furthermore, it is: “A political space where the Christians can develop and gain influence in society. We believe that politics needs values, we believe that things can change and we know that the Christians must participate” she states in the same interview. In another edition of Pulso Cristiano, Hotton continues, explaining the political platform of VPMP: “we will not concentrate on the ideological, but on the values” (Hotton in Pulso Cristiano nr.132).

The VPMP has also listed a number of values that are central to them: (1) *Identity*: What makes a person the person he/she is, the recognition of her personality and history; (2) *Family*: The core-family is the nucleus and basis of society. Family forms our identity and moral values, our social orientation and development as human beings; and (3) *Solidarity, Commitment and Honesty*: values and ideals to live up to (Valoresparamipais 2010)

There are thus distinct socio-political issues which concern the VPMP more than any other: homosexuality; pro-life (anti-abortion), and a general defense of the ‘family’. In the city-elections in Buenos Aires in 2011, the VPMP listed a number of value-political proposals. First three central commitments: (1) The human being as the center of all political activity, (2) defense of life from conception, and (3) defense of the family. These three are the fundamental values for the VPMP when it comes to practical political engagement. Honesty and solidarity and the other basic values are not forgotten, but these three are crucial for the translation of Pentecostal communication into political communication. Those cannot be negotiated. The focus on the human being, the individual, reflects both the unique creation of each man in God’s image as well as the inclination to support conservative liberalism. The defense of the family and the defense of life from conception illustrate the importance of the creation of life as God’s work (pro-life) and the importance of the core or traditional family as the central building block of society, and for the transformation thereof.

In addition to the explicit political project of the VPMP, the ACIERA together with other Pentecostal groups hosted the so-called *Expovalores* (ValueExpo) in 2010. Eight challenges for the Argentine Pentecostal pastors for the 21st century were presented in a short text (Aciera web-page 2010). To meet the challenges of the future, the pastors and the churches must learn more about these issues and consider where to stand and how to react upon them: Environment and sustainable development, demographic explosion, natural disasters, bioethics, politics, evangelization, influencing new scenarios (mass media, internet, new media, etc.), and the awareness that only a united church can deal with these challenges (ibid).

A comprehensive list of things to learn, indeed, but what does it mean? To what degree would one expect the Pentecostals to interpret natural disasters and the demographic explosion as signs of the end of the world? Many Pentecostals do think that natural disasters are signs of the coming end-times, but at the same time many won't sit and wait: they want to participate in the transformation of the world.

## IX. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In order to understand how Argentine Pentecostals conceive of these matters we should remember their motto: "Pentecostalism as the basis for the transformation of the individual, the family and the world". The Pentecostals, as good soldiers of Christ, have not only to be prepared but also prepare their surroundings. Given the fact that the Pentecostals should follow up on this, one might see this as an example of total or holistic integralism; the end of negative and positive dualism, when the transformation of the world has made way for the establishment of the kingdom of God. Is this the recipe for the transformation of the world? And, is this the key to understanding their focus on values. The Pentecostals *know* how to transform the individual with evangelization. They are now approaching an understanding where the transformation of the family means securing the 'naturally' created core family. And in the eight *Expovalores* challenges lie the next (or last) steps towards the transformation of society. But in order to achieve this, they need to learn how to approach the political sphere without losing their religion, so to speak. Here the issue of compatibility becomes crucial for maintaining 'the Pentecostal' in the political. If the religious is lost in (the political) translation the political will fail. However, the central question remains: how to combine the concern for the poor and social justice with a political ideology that suits the pro-life and anti-homosexuality stance? Are the values of the liberal left too hard to swallow for the Pentecostals? So it seems. Thus, it may look like it is easier to meet on practical political measures than on liberal vs. conservative values. If these values are to override other concerns in the political sphere, then it is

likely that the Pentecostals will have problems gaining a substantial amount of votes. And it may be for this exact reason that the Pentecostals' political projects in Argentina have not succeeded yet: Pentecostal voters care about the poor, as they are often quite poor themselves, and about family issues and values at the same time. However, values as the basis for politics are still in its infancy. If the VPMP manages to bridge the gap between liberal-conservative values and policies aimed at reducing poverty and social injustice and, at the same time, maintain compatibility between the Pentecostal and the political, it might constitute a more significant political force in the future.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I.e. all these spheres (or sub-systems) become more independent; e.g. the Catholic clergy loses political power and the courts become more independent.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the Pentecostals in neighbouring countries like Chile and Brazil, were growing much faster than in Argentina. However, compared to the growth from the 1950s and onwards, the growth was relatively slow also in these countries.

<sup>3</sup> Who they are and what they may represent will be discussed more thoroughly throughout the article, as it is one of the main concerns in order to understand the processes of change that Argentine Pentecostalism has gone through.

<sup>4</sup> Sepúlveda's statement is from 1991. Today increasing numbers of Pentecostals also come from the middle- and upper classes (which may question the validity of Sepúlveda's statement).

<sup>5</sup> All these could now easily be placed under the Pentecostal umbrella in Argentina.

<sup>6</sup> The theory holds that Pentecostals say one thing but do another, e.g. they believe in healing through prayer but at the same time see a Western doctor.

<sup>7</sup> In the 1970s, the Pentecostal Churches did not dominate the Protestant scene to such a degree that one can speak of 'all' Evangelical Churches as Pentecostal or pentecostalized – it would therefore be more accurate to use the term *Iglesias Evangélicas*, which for the Latin American countries included all Protestant Churches.

<sup>8</sup> The Obelisk of Buenos Aires is an iconic historic monument built in 1936 to commemorate the fourth centenary of the first foundation of the city of Buenos Aires.

<sup>9</sup> "...hemos decidido transmitir el presente documento a los miembros de nuestra comunidad evangélica en todo el país, y hacerlo extensivo a la ciudadanía en general, como miembros integrantes del maravilloso pueblo de la Nación Argentina".

<sup>10</sup> No es un plan político [ ] lo importante es que Dios da el fruto, que hace que la semilla crezca.

<sup>11</sup> Facultad Latinoamericana de Estudios Teológicos.

<sup>12</sup> That they speak in tongues while they are oblivious to social problems (Warrington 2008).

<sup>13</sup> "Sólo nuestro voto inteligente puede impedir que sea impuesto el aborto por ley,..."

<sup>14</sup> *Cortemos boleto*: "Split-ticket voting, which refers to a ballot on which voters have chosen candidates from different political parties when multiple offices (e.g. president, vice-president, senators, deputies) are being decided by a single election". In the election one can vote for a president and vice-president and normally one follows the party or front and vote accordingly for legislators as well. But, if you like Cristina Kirchner but not 'her' legislators you can vote for her but for other legislators.

<sup>15</sup> Global evangelizing projects directed at children aged 4-14 and the 10/40 Window: the area of the world between latitudes 10 degrees and 40 degrees north of the Equator in the Eastern Hemisphere, covering North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The window contains most of the world's areas of greatest physical and spiritual needs, most of the world's least-reached peoples and most of the governments that oppose Christianity. Two thirds of the world's population is located in the 10/40 window. In areas of the 10/40 window, there is only one missionary per one million people.

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