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THE EMERGENCE IN URUGUAY OF THE CHURCH “THE INTERNATIONAL ENCOUNTER WITH JESUS MINISTRY” WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE THEOLOGY OF PROSPERITY: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS FROM THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF THE FAITHFUL PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract: This presentation will consist of a qualitative analysis of the Church “El Ministerio Internacional Encuentro con Jesús”, a neopentecostal church present in Uruguay since 2010. Neopentecostal religions are part of the universe of analysis of my doctoral thesis entitled “The expansion of religions in contexts of poverty in Uruguay”. Within the so-called neo-Pentecostal Churches, religious congregations questioned by the Evangelical Churches themselves, based on the theology of prosperity, have flourished in Latin America and the United States -and our country is no stranger to this phenomenon. That is why we focus our attention on the Church “Encuentro con Jesús”, to make clear the presence and *modus operandi* of these religions in our country. Through the method “Structural Discourse Analysis” we will give an account of the social representations that govern the behavior of the faithful and pastors of the church. The relevant role that money plays in cults and the recurring request for economic contribution by the faithful in its various modalities will be analyzed: offerings, tithes, first fruits, etc. It will be verified, through the testimonies of the faithful, that even those faithful in vulnerable situations are those who always contribute their offering. Likewise, on the part of the faithful there is an “emulation” towards the figure of the pastor, whom they call “dad”, and whom they must “honor” (financially) so that he has the best watch, the best clothes, the best car, etc... This economic donation is fully accepted by the faithful without any question and in many cases they do it voluntarily under fear of the curse that can come to them if they do not. The enormous paradox of this religious machine that financially squeezes the last bit out of the faithful is that, immersed in the eager search for economic prosperity through

religious channels, they are left in a situation of even greater vulnerability and wrapped in a situation of psychological dependency. with the church authorities, adopting a passive attitude regarding the real possibilities of being able to get out of that situation.

Keywords: Religion, neopentecostalism, money.

INTRODUCTION

In the present paper a qualitative analysis will be carried out on the discourse of the neo-Pentecostal church “The International Ministry Encounter with Jesus”¹, present in Uruguay since 2010. It is worth clarifying that neo-Pentecostal religions are part of the universe of analysis of my doctoral thesis entitled “The expansion of religions in contexts of poverty in Uruguay”, for this reason, this religion has been chosen to study its *modus operandi* and the role that money plays as the centrality of the discourse that mainly summons some inhabitants of our capital city.

The objective of my doctoral thesis is to elucidate the mutual relations between religion and poverty in the Uruguay of the 21st century. The primary interest is to clarify the links that exist between the various belief systems and the poverty conditions of the population. In this sense, it will seek to determine if the different religious worldviews of poverty contribute to development, or, on the contrary, perpetuate the social structures of production and reproduction of poverty.

Here is the conceptual framework, that is, the fixation of the perspective or observation framework that according to Manuel Canales (2014:11), is the starting point to begin any investigation, since “the theoretical framework traces a thought of the object”, is the construction of a way of seeing it. “The

1 Pastorino, Miguel: “The Church The International Ministry Encounter with Jesus in Uruguay: a new sect in Uruguay?”, published on April 18, 2016, available at: <http://es.aleteia.org/2016/04/18/el-ministerio-internacional-encuentro-con-jesus-una-nueva-secta-en-uruguay/>

observer has produced an observer schema that allows him to stabilize his relationship with the object; he has proposed a perspective and scale from which he will observe” (Canales, 2014: 11).

This way, we will address the discourse of the faithful and pastors of the Encuentro con Jesús Church as part of our object of study defined in my doctoral thesis, within a previously defined theoretical framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/ CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Within the so-called neo-Pentecostal Churches, religious congregations questioned by the Evangelical Churches themselves, based on the theology of prosperity, have flourished in Latin America and the United States -and our country is no stranger to this phenomenon. That is why we focus our attention on the Church “The International Encounter with Jesus Ministry”, to make clear the presence and *modus operandi* of these religions in our country.

But before analyzing the speech of the Pastor of this Church and of the faithful followers, let us define what we mean when we speak of Theology of prosperity. It is worth noting that “this religious vision does not in itself establish a systematic hermeneutic method in reading the Bible, which is why it is strange that the theology of prosperity, not being strictly a theology, presents a high degree of consensus on the vital knots of his religious-economic discourse” (Coto and Salgado, 2008: 104).

Therefore, the use of large media channels by the preachers of this religious vision (internet, radio, television), enables the construction of a homogeneous discourse that can be studied and analyzed within the reach of the social sciences. The theology of prosperity consists of a compensation logic, where the faithful contribute financially to the work of God,

and God will reward them in this world. It is confirmed in the testimony of the faithful the eager search for economic prosperity, which is achieved from the contribution of offerings and the tithe.

The spiritual leaders of these churches profit through psychological and economic manipulation of their faithful, who have great admiration for them and consider that their love for God is expressed through their devotion to the Pastor. That is why they find themselves involved in a situation of psychological dependency, offering considerable sums of money taking into account the income of the faithful, and ending up in a situation of vulnerability even greater than the one they found themselves before going to church.

Likewise, it is preached that the blessing is given by God to the faithful who obey the principles of His Word, while the opposite -the curse- may be declared on the members of the community and it consists of material poverty, in the understanding that people are poor because they have no faith or because they have been cursed. “Poverty, then, is defined as a sinful condition that is not desired by God; quite the opposite: being in material poverty does not allow the “Glory of God” to be manifested in the lives of individuals (...) People who live in poverty do not please God; that is, his condition is a manifestation of sin, of filth; they live in poverty because they have allowed Satan to get involved in their lives” (Coto and Salgado, 2008: 105).

Therefore, a mystical-magical thought predominates in the faithful that leads them to carry out any type of action that the pastors request for fear of any type of curse or losing God’s blessing. This leads them to the most ridiculous practices of obedience (fasting, financial offerings), which lead to spiritual and psychological manipulation.

The self-proclaimed “Apostle” Guillermo

Maldonado, is one of the referents of the theology of prosperity and in our country, the Uruguayan Fabio Ceramella (who claims to be a psychologist) is identified as his faithful follower. Ceramella is the leading Pastor of the religious congregation “El Ministerio Internacional Encuentro con Jesús”, located in the country’s capital (Gral. Flores y Garibaldi), who together with his wife, Pastor Ana Olivera, promises his faithful that the more contribute financially to the Church, more will be rewarded by the Lord.

METHODOLOGY

To analyze the feelings of the faithful and pastors of the Encuentro con Jesús Church, we have chosen the method called “Structural Discourse Analysis”, which is a technique within qualitative research methodologies. In Chile, the method of structural discourse analysis has been applied to the analysis of popular religiosity (Parker, C., 1994).

As explained in the book by Manuel Canales “Methodologies of social research. Introduction to trades” (2007: 299), this method is used to study social representations, understood as organizing principles and ideas of society or of a particular social group (in our case, the members of a religion) that give meaning and contribute to interpret facts and acts that are shared by the members of a community.

According to Martinic (2007: 300) “Social representations constitute reference systems that make the world logical and coherent for subjects, organizing explanations about the facts and the relationships that exist between them. They are not a mere reflection of the exterior but, rather, a construction that gives sense and meaning to the object or referent that is represented”.

Therefore, it is of interest in the present work to analyze the social representations of the members of the church the Encounter

with Jesus, which order religious practice. Through the discourses of faithful and pastors, it is possible to build descriptive categories that order religious discourse, that is, what we call “codes”. “The codes allow us to construct the distinctions that the announcer makes when interpreting reality and that is part of the social representations that are the object of study” (Martinic, 2007: 308). Then we will try to establish relationships between the codes as a second step in the interpretation aimed at describing the semantic structures or relationships that the categories have among themselves within the material (in this work we will analyze a press article and testimonies of faithful and pastors of the church taken by a television program called “Santo y Seña”, broadcast by Channel 4).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Next, we will analyze in detail some testimonies of the faithful and the Pastor of this Church taken from the television program broadcast by the “Santo y Seña” program.

MADE IN URUGUAY: THE CHURCH OF “DAD” AND “MOM”

Ceramella had already appeared on the Uruguayan religious scene as a benchmark for other non-Christian congregations, as a disciple of a Venezuelan Guru Swami Sananda from the New Age current, as well as a speaker at metaphysical talks, which is striking because they are religious currents of other esoteric environments, so that this charismatic figure has been a Guru or teacher of different religious disciplines.

A few years ago, Ceramella founded in our country the Church “Encuentro con Jesús”, which is a copy of the Churches of the Theology of Prosperity of Central America, whose reference would be the media Pastor Guillermo Maldonado. Pastor Ceramella calls

himself “dad” by his faithful and also implores that his wife be called “mama”.

All the testimonies of the faithful show that they came to the Church invited by other acquaintances and that they were very well received with a welcome dinner with Christian music in a very pleasant atmosphere. After that first contact, they were urged to fill out an exhaustive form with their personal information, where they had to declare where they worked, their income, etc., which makes it clear that this church has a good recruitment system in place.

“When I arrived they gave me a hug, a kiss, and immediately they made me fill out the form, I was just about to leave quickly with my son because it was getting late and they stopped me to fill out the “you are under arrest” form (Mariana Amarilla, Former member of Encuentro con Jesús”).

All the faithful state that they received affection in the first meetings they attended (a hug, a handshake) for which they felt content, and the day after filling out the form they received a phone call to find out how they had felt. inviting them back to church.

“They come, they hug you, you feel pampered, you feel protected, you feel that they are really interested in you, they make you believe that, they ask you how you are, how you got on, what is your life, and you tell them, and as a result of that you get hooked. Look, it’s important that you be here for him,” explains Tania Sainz, a former faithful, who came to the church because her husband had an abusive drug use (base paste).

What is striking about this church is the “paternal” relationship that is established between the pastor and his faithful, in the case of a relationship of submission, of authoritarianism, where the latter must “provide” the father with the material goods that he needs. It is about a “father” who owns the best watch, the best car, the “enlightened”

one, who holds all the wisdom within the religious community and who does not admit questions of any kind. The use of this specific language by the faithful and pastors, where the pastors are “father” and “mother”, and the faithful “sons”, make everyone feel part of the same community, acquiring specific roles.

“When we entered the church we called him “pastor”, it was not “mom” and “dad”, then, overnight, they had a revelation, and another leader told us that if we didn’t call them “dad” we were dishonoring, a matter of being transmitted to you in such a way that if you did not feel it, you were wrong, you were demon possessed” (Javier Donato, former faithful).

The faithful narrate that the pastor asked them for money to buy a new cell phone, as well as a new car for the pastor (mother), purchases that were made with the contribution of the parishioners.

It is worth noting the low critical attitude of the faithful, accepting the economic donation as “natural”, remaining immersed in a relationship of submission without questioning. As the following believer expresses: “we could not ask them anything because they did not give you room to think for yourself, you had to do what they told you, if you were not cursed and possessed” (Daniela González, former faithful).

Whenever the faithful ask for an explanation, the pastors answer with an absolute affirmation, because God indicates so, the Bible says so, typical sectarian behavior.

THE MEANING OF “HONOUR”

Former members of the church agree on the insistent demand for money as a manifestation of faith: the tithe, the first fruit, the offering, the honor, are the different ways of requesting money for the benefit of the chief pastors of the church, or as Ceramella and his wife call themselves “dad” and “mom.”

“At first the Bible was read, the pastor drew

it for you, and then obviously they talked about honor, which is money” (Tania Sainz, former member of Encuentro con Jesús).

It is worth noting that all the faithful agree that the central thing in the cults was the economic donation: “What was most talked about was honor and money” (Javier Donato, former faithful of the Church).

In all the cults it is necessary to grant the offering, which is an economic contribution that depends on the will of each faithful. At the beginning of the month the faithful are urged to contribute the tithe (10% of the salary) and at the beginning of the year the contribution of the “scoop” is requested, which is the entire salary, in exchange for having prosperity throughout the year.

Thus, the faithful of the church find themselves involved in a logic of consideration, where the one who gives the most receives the most. “How you honor God, he will determine how he honors you. That means that faith is a manifestation of honor” (Pastor Ceramella). This way, the desire to achieve economic prosperity is instilled in the faithful, which is achieved through donation to God (to his church).

In this sense, it has been verified that many faithful have ended up in a very bad economic situation due to the recurring financial donations to the church, even pointing out the great ambiguity of the case of a lady who ate from the garbage but who did not stop contributing to church. As the following faithful expressed: “I met a woman who came to the situation of having to go out to the houses to ask for food for her dog, to rummage through the garbage, and it was not for the dog, it was for her the food, but the contribution of the church never stopped doing it. They didn’t care what situation you were in, they made you give whatever you have, because by faith God will prosper you” (Mariana Amarillo, former faithful).

The “honor” is the offering, which is considered by the faithful as an investment of money so that God in turn rewards them in the same way, in order to obtain the goods of the capitalist society in which we are immersed (having the best cell phone on the market, the best watch, the best clothes). The apparent paradox is that the faithful, who have not been able to achieve economic prosperity through traditional channels, pour what little money they have into this type of church, leaving themselves immersed in a situation of even greater poverty. *“It went beyond tithes and offerings as the Bible speaks, right? This was money all the time, if it wasn’t for a collection for the pastor’s cell phone, it was for the pastor’s car,” says Daniela González, a former faithful.*

Likewise, the church strictly monitors how much each of the faithful contributes, who feel “watched” under the strict gaze of the pastors, which leads them to offer even more. As the following believer explains: *“You had to put your first and last name on the envelopes to know who it was from” (Tania Sainz, former member of Encuentro con Jesús).*

THE “CURSE” AS A TOOL FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL MANIPULATION

The novelty of the neo-Pentecostal churches in recent times is the use of the “curse” as a psychological tool. That is to say, what was traditional within the evangelical churches was the power that pastors had to issue a “blessing” to their faithful. What is striking is that currently pastors often use the curse resource if the faithful do not abide by God’s commandments.

“Do not ask, if God tells you this, the Lord brought me this word and it is wrong for you to doubt, and the curse behind, an economic curse will come to you, your work, etc” (Mariana Amarillo, former faithful).

The faithful explain that if you enter into disobedience, the pastor can curse you, and

if the pastor withdraws the blessing, all kinds of calamities can befall them. This resource makes the faithful, especially the most superstitious, behave under the directives of the religious authorities for fear of what may happen to them if they fall into disobedience. *“If you did not honor the word that the pastor said, you could get sick from cancer until the generations of your family were cursed”.* (Javier Donato, former faithful).

CONCLUSIONS

The appearance of the “Encuentro con Jesús” church on the Uruguayan religious scene attracts new followers and further blurs the image of a “secular” society with which we Uruguayans identify. At the end of the 90’s, neo-Pentecostal churches began to arrive in Uruguay, mainly from Brazil or Argentina. What is truly new about the Encuentro con Jesús church is that it is an authentically Uruguayan religion, set up by Uruguayans copying the style of the Prosperity Theology churches of Central America.

Through the method “Structural Discourse Analysis” we have given an account of the social representations that govern the behavior of the faithful and pastors of the church. We have analyzed the relevant role that money plays in worship and the recurring request for economic contribution by the faithful in its various modalities: offerings, tithes, first fruits, etc.

It has been verified, through the testimonies of the faithful, that even those faithful in vulnerable situations were those who always contributed (they even point out the case of a lady who ate from the garbage but who always made her contribution to the church). Likewise, on the part of the faithful there is an “emulation” towards the figure of the pastor, whom they call “dad”, and whom they must “honor” so that he has the best watch, the best clothes, the best car, etc. This economic

donation is fully accepted by the faithful without any question and in many cases they do it voluntarily under fear of the curse that can come to them if they do not.

Likewise, that figure of a “well dressed and stuffed” pastor is what the faithful emulate and seek to materialize in their lives. They seek to get out of poverty, since whoever lives in poverty is because they have received a curse, only those who “honor” God financially will be able to prosper, get out of poverty, achieve the good economic life they seek.

The enormous paradox of this religious machine that financially squeezes the last bit out of the faithful is that, immersed in the eager search for economic prosperity through religious channels, they are left in a situation of even greater vulnerability and wrapped in a situation of psychological dependency. with the church authorities, adopting a passive attitude regarding the real possibilities of being able to get out of that situation.

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