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Megachurches and the Problem of Leadership: an Analysis of the Encounter between the Evangelical World and Politics in Argentina

JOAQUÍN ALGRANTI

ABSTRACT

Researchers usually address the political aspect of Evangelical groups by highlighting their involvement in party politics: their ability to create new organisations or form alliances with existing ones, introducing into the electoral field the assumption of a more or less homogeneous or easily influenced 'Christian vote'. However, historical experience in Argentina shows that launching into politics is full of obstacles. Some of the most important innovations introduced by Neo-Pentecostalism – as the fastest-growing expression of the Evangelical world – are linked to the consolidation of megachurches in middle- and high-class neighbourhoods and the training of Evangelical leaders on a large scale. Both these innovations develop in correlation with a shift of the Gospel towards the 'world' and the need for social change; that is, a Christian call to transform the environment. This article aims to explore the political implications of Evangelical leadership in megachurches located in Buenos Aires, Argentina. This work is based on original materials, compiled for a research project using ethnographic techniques such as participant observation, in-depth interviews and documentation review.

Introduction

The presence of Evangelicals in public spaces, hospitals, prisons, the media and the cultural sphere shows a growing process of diversification, the scope and limits of which are still unclear. However, despite this diversification, as Neo-Pentecostals blend into the 'world', learning its codes and languages, there are internal patterns that structure the social space of Neo-Pentecostalism in two relatively separate networks. They are what we could broadly call 'formal' and 'informal' networks of institutional belonging. I see the criterion of 'formality' as the possession of legitimate symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2009) granted by being part of institutional networks well known in the Christian field, such as, for example, the Christian Alliance of Evangelical Churches of the Argentine Republic (*Alianza Cristiana de Iglesias Evangélicas de la República Argentina* (ACIERA)). This is one of the main institutions that gathers, supports and controls Neo-Pentecostal churches in Argentina. Being a member of ACIERA works, for the religious authorities, as a sign of distinction and legitimacy on the basis of peer acknowledgment, which ratifies the doctrinal unity of the church and transparency in terms of organisation. It also offers a formal structure of contacts, relationships and expert knowledge that contributes to the projection of

pastors on the national and international level. By contrast, ‘informal’ networks are those systems of social connections that develop beyond the official institutions without their recognition. I consider that the analytical differentiation of these two territories can help to explain one of the possible structuring principles of Neo-Pentecostalism. In Argentina, both ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ networks were historically colonised by small and medium-sized churches until the 1990s, when a different form of religious organisation began to consolidate itself.

This new form, on which this article focuses, is the ‘megachurch’ (Thumma and Travis, 2007; Gramby-Sobukwe and Hoiland, 2009). Megachurches are relatively new in the Evangelical world and have still not been studied in depth. They are large religious organisations with a congregation of 20,000 or more members, organised internally in relatively autonomous groups which work interdependently in areas or ministries dedicated to one particular task: evangelisation, choir, social assistance, counselling, sport, media. These churches present a complex network of internal relationships with their own system of authority and governmental structures. They are generally transnational organisations that participate in the external circuits of promotion and financing, although they maintain their economic autonomy. One of the distinctive characteristics of these groups is the systematic training of religious leaders, offering free access to learning opportunities and promotional networks for followers who decide to try to professionalise in the ‘Gospel’.

In Argentina, especially since the 1990s, megachurches have been consolidated within the framework of the general growth of the Evangelical world.¹ Some of them are connected to foreign religious organisations that have set up new branches in the country, like the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (*Iglesia Universal del Reino de Dios* (UCKG)) and the God is Love (*Dios es Amor*) Church, both of which originated in Brazil. Others are the result of the efforts of a second generation of Argentinean Neo-Pentecostal leaders. Following a trend that echoes that in many Latin American countries, these megachurches direct their evangelising to the middle and upper-middle classes in Buenos Aires. In this article I focus on one church where this class orientation is clearly expressed: the Evangelical King of Kings Church (*Rey de Reyes*).

After a review of my research methodology and a general introduction to the field, this work is divided into three parts. In the first part I look at the morphology of the megachurch, paying special attention to the organisation and division of labour that defines what I shall call the ‘cellular system’. In the second part I aim to differentiate the three positions of the subject that crystallise in the church’s network of relationships, distinguishing among the hard nucleus, the intermediate area and the peripheral community. Lastly, in the third part I focus on the political dimension that leader training assumes in view of the two most important problems that, in my opinion, the Argentinian Evangelical movement is facing: the problem of representation and the problem of discourse.

Methodology

This article presents some of the results from a larger-scale research project: my doctoral thesis in sociology co-supervised by the University of Buenos Aires and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in France between 2005 and 2009.² The project focused on the Evangelical–Pentecostal megachurch King of Kings (*Rey de Reyes*), which I briefly describe in the next section. It was based on 33 open and extensive interviews; the same person might be interviewed two or three times. The interviewees were initially selected on the basis of their membership in the various

different ministries of this church in the area of social work: the foundation for social assistance, the radio station, the counselling ministry, the School of Life and the School of Leaders. Later I arranged the interviews into three groups, as I shall explain in this article: the hard nucleus, the intermediate areas, and the institutional periphery, according to the believers' level of membership in the institution.

The questions posed in the interviews revolved around the religious training of the believers and the way they came in touch, first with the Gospel in general, and then with King of Kings in particular, focusing on the reasons for their spiritual change, the social networks that allowed or hampered it, and the effects of religion on daily life, if they were aware of such. A second group of questions aimed at exploring the interviewees' relationship with the church: their institutional inscription, the way they participated or did not participate in the ministries, the internal trajectory within the channels offered by the church or on its margins, the relationships among the membership groups, and the acknowledgment – or lack of it – of internal conflicts and tension. Finally, a third group of questions aimed to explore the interviewees' views on the situation in the country, the origin of social problems and how to solve them, and also the role they assigned to party politics, social protest movements and the role of the church in society.

My methodological strategy aimed at complementing and strengthening the method of case study with participant observations focusing on two types of key events in the life of the church. The first was systematic participation in the daily activities that make up the religious life of the believers: weekly services (including those focusing on prosperity and healing), cell meetings and occasional events such as concerts, seminars and international visits. The second was participation in internal activities offered by the ministries: regular courses, talks and classes.³

Finally, I complemented the primary data from the interviews and the participant observations with a restricted group of secondary data that allowed me to broaden the study of the believers' views on politics. The data came from two different types of secondary sources: first, the corpus of material published by the church: religious books, manuals, brochures, newspapers, recordings and information from their internet websites; second, a national survey 'Religion and Social Structure in 21st-Century Argentina' (Mallimaci *et al.*, 2008) which aimed at the statistical analysis of the different levels and types of religiosity among the population in general and also divided among the various geographical areas of the country. Both sources contributed not only to a clarification of the church's official discourse about its own role and the role of Christians in society, among other issues, but also to the characterisation of Pentecostalism on the national level as well as a comparative analysis of the various regions.

Introducing the Field

The King of Kings (*Rey de Reyes*) Church was founded in 1986 by the minister Claudio Freidzon and it now has over 20,000 members. It is located in the northern area of Buenos Aires, in the neighbourhood of Belgrano. This location has set a milestone in Pentecostal geography, achieving the aim of gaining access to the higher-income sectors, into which this religious group has historically put a great deal of effort, and marking its passage from the periphery to the centre of the city of Buenos Aires. The church comprises bookshops, other shops, three churches, a foundation dedicated to social assistance, radio and television stations, the newspaper *Enfoque*, the Cristo Bar, and its own school, the Buenos Aires Christian School. The social composition of the members is mostly middle- and lower-middle-class, predominantly women and young people.

The members of the church are organised into ‘cells’ (*células*). We may say that the cell system is a model for growth and integration that arranges the members in a network of differentiated groups which act in a joint way. Each cell of four to eight people has a leader and a deputy leader called a ‘*Timoteo*’, named after St Paul’s disciple and representing young leadership in the church. They both guide the group life through meetings, personal interviews and prayer meetings. To become a leader it is necessary to go through a training process offered by the church, and to obtain a group of believers to shepherd. The training process includes the School of Life (*Escuela de Vida*) and the School of Leaders (*Escuela de Líderes*). The members who decide to enroll receive religious and moral training and education at no cost, in weekly courses over one year. The classes are mixed and members of different ages may attend. The teaching staff is made up of 30 permanent and 10 rotating teachers, for a total of 1500 students per semester.

The church structure is hierarchical. We can distinguish three levels of authority: ministers, leaders and cell supervisors; the next level comprises the ordinary members. Every person occupying a leadership position reports to an immediate superior, who holds them accountable for their performance with the people they have in their charge. The most important authority regarding religious training, institutional decisions and church projection is the minister Claudio Freidzon, and in second position is his wife Betty. The hierarchical chain continues with a first group of ‘co-ministers’, made up of two persons who work very closely with Freidzon and have been with him since his first evangelistic campaigns. Their degree of authority gives them the responsibility for heading key ministries like the youth area and the school, as well as the privilege of being among the few people who hold their own worship services and even replace the minister while he is away. Then there is a second group, made up of those we could call the ‘apprentice ministers’: the leaders who are being trained to preach in the official worship services. Each of them is in charge of essential areas of the church such as the foundation, accounting management or the coordination of young adults cells. Together with the co-ministers group these are the people who are responsible for each of the ministries that define the church work areas, as well as their assistants. They are the biggest portion of the stable structure of paid people, 30 in number. The ‘cell supervisors’ comprise a third group. They are the leaders who gradually took on more responsibilities as their own cell grew and became more diversified. The supervisors have a varying number of leaders in their charge: between 12 and 20. They assist these leaders in their work with the members, and monitor their performance. The last link in the hierarchical chain, the fourth group, is the largest. This is the group of ‘cell leaders’, made up of those who have decided to undertake training in the church, beginning with the annual course in the School of Life and then the School of Leaders where they receive instruction on Bible knowledge, praise, prayer and group work. In this way, in two years they can reach the basic circle of the religious authority chain the church offers. In this article I shall focus on this ‘cell leaders’ group. I shall return to the functions of cell leaders after an analysis of the ‘cellular system’ as such.

Morphology of Megachurches: the Cellular System

Like all institutions, megachurches delimit a space of social relations, structured on the basis of their own criteria, where authority positions that contribute to the internal organisation of its members are defined. Being a member of a megachurch in Buenos Aires, like the King of Kings Church, the New Life Christian Center (*Centro Cristiano*

Nueva Vida) or the Faith Cathedral (*Catedral de la Fe*), initially means being included in a network of relationships with their own hierarchy and authority criterion. One of the initial experiences of the subject on first socialising in the Evangelical environment consists in learning who his/her close referents are, in emotional terms, but also in terms of rank and obedience. A number of specialists, both classic (Willems, 1967; Lalive d'Épinay, 1968) and contemporary (Freston, 2001; Gifford, 2004; Kramer, 2005), point out the hierarchical nature of social relations in Pentecostalism: the vertical authority established by churches. Megachurches are no exception to this. It is therefore necessary to describe the material substrate that acts as support for collective life, configuring the criteria of organisation and distribution of the population. Social morphology aims to study the way human groups establish themselves on a territory on the basis of governmental systems, hierarchies and labour division (Mauss, 1979, p. 360). Here my purpose is to characterise the morphology of this religious group, focusing on the community organisation strategy that configures the cellular system. Choosing this system expresses the response of the church to the challenge of continuous growth, containing and consolidating the attendants in different spaces of integration. It is a community integration model based on multiple ways of belonging. We shall see that the cellular principle is both an organisational device and the way to personalise the movement; that is to say, a strategy for developing social bonds and a sense of belonging among the members.

The starting-point of cellular organisation – which ministers take from the experiences of Colombian minister César Castellanos and Korean minister David Yonggi Cho, adapting them to Argentinean needs – sends us back to the first question about the profile or type of religious association that they are trying to establish at a given time. Co-minister Sergio, in charge of the Youth Ministry (*Ministerio de Jóvenes*), explains very clearly the tension that exists between ‘church’ and ‘movement’:

A church can be a ‘movement’ or a ‘church’. A ‘movement’ is when you have a place and only one visible head . . . people are coming and going, there is high traffic but people don’t know each other, there isn’t any, say, friendship, any sense of belonging, any communion . . . so this is just a ‘movement’. If you take a good look, the faces that were there yesterday are not the faces that are here today; the place is always full, but it is not the same people because people feel they satisfy the need to receive, but it is not a place where they can spend time . . . Nobody knows them, you don’t know anybody, it is not personalised. You know, like companies that give a personalised treatment. And this is what a ‘church’ gives You know people, they know you; you belong, communicate; you are supported, advised; you don’t have only one referent, you have many referents as far as leadership is concerned. This is achieved through the cell. (Sergio, co-minister)

It is clear that the organisation of scattered crowds into small groups has to do not only with governing criteria but also, and especially, with the development of a certain kind of social bond. This social bond is based on mutual knowledge, a sense of belonging and emotional ties that transform the crowd into what classic sociology calls community (*Gemeinschaft*) as opposed to society (*Gesellschaft*). These cells are the smallest spaces of interaction that the King of Kings Church offers to the congregation. They emerge from believers who participate in the networks of the

church (like the School of Life and the School of Leaders) and, at the same time, they bring in new church members until the group reaches about 8–12 people. The criteria for the division of the cells are age, marital status and tasks performed in the institution: there are thus multiple places where the newcomer can be integrated, according to his/her personal situation. There are cells made up only of teenagers, or young adults, or senior citizens; most of the cells are for men or women only, but there are also groups for newly-married and for long-married couples, and also mixed-sex cells based on the activities of the members in the various ministries. There are around 2400 registered cells, of which 1100 are for young adults between 12 and 33 years of age, 900 are for women between 30 and 55, and 400 are for adult men in the same age group. As we can see, the most important hub of the congregation is the young people, divided by gender and with a majority of women, followed by adult women. Men between 30 and 55 years old seem to be the most difficult population to attract, and also to keep – not only for King of Kings, but for the entire Evangelical universe in general.

The cellular mechanism operates in various dimensions that help with the expanded replication and maintenance of spaces of sociability where various special ways of interaction prevail. These are defined precisely by their ludic, gratuitous nature, which makes being with others and for others an end in itself; they are thus consciously different from the instrumental relationships of the ‘profane world’, which are characterised by a ‘means-ends’ relationship. This is not to say that personal interest or the search for benefits are absent, but that these logics are subordinated to other principles of interaction.

We can differentiate four constituent dimensions of the cells. (1) In terms of time, group life functions on the base of continuity and permanence, where the partner becomes a regular witness of the daily events that configure others’ personal biographies. Duration and routine are essential anchor points that give identity to the cell in contrast with the ephemeral environments society offers. We could say that a ‘spiritual family relationship’ is established, gathering the members in reduced groups, each with their own internal authorities. (2) In terms of space, the appropriation of shared territories allows for the location of the experiences within the geographical network of the church. Meetings take place in the material and symbolic domains that Christian networks project into the neighbourhood through the church, the school, the foundation, the coffee shops and even public space. (3) Interaction and social bonds are built on the base of mutual insight, focused on the collective elaboration of painful experiences (Algranti, 2010b, pp. 112–15), but also on enjoyment, entertainment and friendship. (4) Finally, the cell promotes the application of the Gospel to the subject’s private life. Through the spiritual guidance of the leaders, the members succeed in incorporating the hermeneutical key that Neo-Pentecostalism offers to interpret the course of events in the light of the Word, gaining the daily habit of Bible reading. These practices are not reduced to the work inside the community; they are also a powerful force for evangelisation.

The ‘cellular system’ thus provides a community morphology where believers find a long-lasting interaction model based on reduced circles of sociability and mutual insight. For the member the first reference within the authority structure of the megachurch is not the group of pastors, co-pastors or supervisors, but the cell leader along with his or her assistant, the *Timoteo*; both of them are in charge of everyday life of the cell. Therefore in this network of relationships to be a ‘pastor’, a ‘cell leader’ or an ‘attendant’ is to occupy different positions within the social space of the megachurch. We can identify three positions or ways of institutional belonging: the

hard nucleus, the intermediate area of cell leaders, and the peripheral community. I shall look at each of these in the next section.

Three Positions of the Subject

The Hard Nucleus

I use this term to refer to the highest and smallest circles of authority, around 30 people, composed of ministers, co-ministers and apprentice ministers, where decisions about resource management, organisation and ministry projection are made, as well as decisions about new orientations or long-term projects the church conceives. This description, which could equally well be applied to a company or public administration department, needs in this case to be completed with the fundamental sacred dimension: that is, the existence of salvation and health goods managed by the minister and his circle. Following Max Weber (1998b, p. 199), we can thus say that the hard nucleus brings together at least two types of charisma: office charisma, given by the exercise of ministerial functions, backed by the training circuits but mainly by peer acknowledgment; and personal charisma, related to the differential abilities of every specialist, where the gifts of healing and prophecy stand out, as well as other charismas such as wisdom, good humour or devotion expressed in sermons. I ascertained that this small circle keeps a balance between the uses of both types of charisma. This select group of religious specialists presents interesting characteristics in relation to their social class of origin, Evangelical training circuits and the position assigned to them in Christian cosmology. Let us go a little deeper into these characteristics.

Regarding the first, their social class of origin, it is important to note that King of Kings, like other megachurches, is oriented towards the broad range of the Argentinean middle class. This does not mean that its social base is only the middle class, but that the image of itself that the church projects through its buildings and its representatives, and the ritual practices it establishes, coincide with the cultural styles of a clearly defined sector of society. The hard nucleus is an accurate reflection of this orientation. If we go by the socio-economic and educational levels of the members of this hard nucleus, we find that their prevailing social class of origin is what we could call the middle sector of the middle class. In fact, we could extend this feature beyond ministers to the entire permanent structure of the church, and even to the leaders and the Timoteos, even though this sector, like the peripheral community, is more heterogeneous, with a large working-class element. It is an interesting paradox that the church's leaders have a class identity that does not correspond directly to that of the congregation. The symbolic dimension contained in the possibility of belonging to a church that relocates its members into the universe of practices and symbols of a more favoured social class is a key element that defines the identity and the attractiveness of King of Kings.

Religious training circuits are the second distinctive characteristic of the ministerial circle. The profile of the specialist preferred by the church is based on formal stages of training at institutions carrying a legitimate symbolic capital, historically accumulated, such as the Biblical Institute of the River Plate (*Instituto Bíblico del Río de la Plata*) or the Union of the Assemblies of God (*Unión de las Asambleas de Dios*). Unlike other ministers, who follow a model of religious authority based on life experiences within the margins of Evangelical institutions or even the legal profession, Claudio Freidzon proposes a ministerial model that aligns itself with the requirements

of an academic course, with its corresponding theological training. The distinction that a minister's diploma offers once the person is assigned a position recognised by the community does not, however, prevent other forms of learning from being valued: learning connected to personal experience and especially to extreme situations. The group that carries the highest rank in the hierarchy inside the church combines theological and ministerial training with a career in the same religious institution, in terms of projects, learning and growing.

However, the condition of being a minister involves not only belonging to a certain social class, having a certain type of training and professional experience. A third characteristic of the leaders with the highest religious authority takes us to the Evangelical universe of beliefs, the symbolic support of a cosmology that confirms their position, and requires that they act according to a definite social role. Let us not forget that the minister represents the most finished expression of Christian values. As Mary Douglas observes (1973, p. 25), the classifying and ordering system of beliefs is realised mainly in the body, through hygienic care, personal grooming and respect for an aesthetics corresponding to a certain world view. In this sense, we could say, after Erving Goffman (2004), that the self-image the minister builds tries to reflect the signs of God's blessing expressed mainly by three exemplary values: prosperity, internal and external health, and leadership. This incarnation of Christian values creates a certain way of being-in-the-world, where the state of bliss is expressed through attitudes, gestures, reactions and behaviours: that is, through a certain social praxis mediated by a semiotic use of the body (Turner, 1995). Here, the visible signs of bliss, as analysed by Eric Kramer (2005, p. 110), demonstrate the presence of the sacred in the person and contribute to the symbolic construction of authority where objective charisma, granted by institutional support, coexists with subjective charisma, linked to the extraordinary qualities that the members of the hard nucleus exhibit.

The Intermediate Area

Between the hard nucleus of ministers in charge of the institution and the regular attendants, who have a distant relationship with the megachurch, there is an intermediate area. This area is governed by Christian leaders, that is to say, by believers who have gone through various formation stages within the network of the church until they are prepared for having their own cell. The leaders, along with their assistants, the *Timoteos*, comprise 18.8 per cent of the church's members, about 4140 people. Comparing them with the top ministers, we can say that their social origin is more lower-middle-class and working-class, like that of most of the congregation. It seems to me that the cellular organisation system is the answer to the question of how to integrate new members without stopping growth: that is, how to produce a synthesis between the pole of the church and the pole of movement, taking the best from each model of religious association. The possibility of the cell depends on the large-scale production of leaders capable of performing ministerial functions; megachurches are salvation companies that while not neglecting the prior stages of doctrinal training depend partly on actively building intermediate areas. However, this division of labour of religious work creates some tensions related to the ambiguous position of those in the intermediate area, who perform a role of influence over their groups, without having the full benefits – both material and symbolic – that the institution offers the higher-ranked circles. To measure the extent of this contradiction, it is necessary to understand which are the advantages and the dangers of training leaders.

We can systematise the benefits of leadership at two analytical levels: the institution and the subjects. For the church, leader training contributes to organising the religious community, configuring a dynamic form of government which is closer to company logics than to bureaucratic domination as conceived by Weber (1998b, pp. 173–78). The advantage of working on the empowerment of the lower levels is that it allows the church to: (1) capitalise the human resources of the congregation, boosting members' previous knowledge; (2) obtain high commitment at a low cost, because the leader's work is voluntary; (3) de-centre ministerial responsibilities by diversifying the offer of different kinds of activities and tasks within the cells; (4) encourage doctrinal homogeneity in the three functions that Joachim Wach identifies (1967, p. 148), in relation to the explanation and articulation of beliefs, the regulatory organisation of cults, and the differential relationships with other types of knowledge;⁴ (5) build executive units capable of performing specific tasks and achieving specific goals. On the other hand, the members who freely choose the path of leadership also obtain important benefits. They receive religious training at the School of Leaders for one year; they attend special meetings; they have access to a network of contact with authorities who are in a higher position, such as supervisors; or they may even reach the circle of preachers and ministers. In short, they obtain an open opportunity to start an internal career within the environment of objective relationships and positions that the institution stabilises, like a social micro-cosmos, with its own rules, dynamics and official growing circles. Every member can become a leader if he or she goes through the religious training stages and then has his or her own cell to apply his or her acquired knowledge and status.

The religious position of the leader also carries objective contradictions related to the scope, the attributes and the limits of his/her role in church. Here, leadership enables learning and the systematic application of ministerial techniques, like one of the oldest technologies of power that Michel Foucault identifies (1992, pp. 270–73) in the art of governing subjects. Working in the direction of the cell turns every leader into a potential minister, recognised in his group by his religious attributes: the ability to pray and preach the Word, knowledge of the Bible, and what believers call in general terms the 'love of God' to refer to identification with the values of Christian life and the way these are shown in the leader's actions. As in the case of ministers, but to a lesser degree, the physical expression of the Evangelical cosmology is an essential requirement for them to perform their tasks. We can say that their situation is structurally ambiguous, since they are close to the bases, they know their needs and problems and can influence them in daily decisions even more than the official ministers, but they do not have financial support from the church, nor prestige (that is, the symbolic weight of charismatic authorities). The danger of training leaders lies naturally in community division, in the disintegration of the hierarchical structure into intermediate groups that respond to the local leader over the official, consecrated church authorities. At this point, we may ask: in what ways does the church manage the structurally contradictory position of the intermediate area?

The answer to this question takes us again to the cell experience and the actual training stages of leaders. The church invests material and human resources in the maintenance of the School of Life and the School of Leaders as two essential stages of the religious training of members who choose the path of leadership. Here the leaders find the cosmological justification of the principles of authority and obedience. The Biblical examples of the Old and the New Testaments set the positive profile of the multiple forms that leadership adopts through figures such as Joshua, Nehemiah, Daniel, Deborah or David, who became authentic historified myths. On the other

hand, the dangers that threaten leaders are related especially to pride, the feeling of superiority, slander (criticism or ‘holy gossip’), rebellion as disregard of authority, false revelations, and one’s own point of view, in terms of prevalence of the individual’s interests and criteria over those of the institution. The requirement of subjection to authority is in turn a key principle for managing the office of the leader and the personal charisma that he or she takes on. Let us bear in mind that the leader functions as a ‘miniature minister’, and his or her position is thus potentially dangerous from the point of view of the religious organisation, if it is not properly inscribed and supervised within the church. There are institutional mechanisms for individual follow-up of leaders by supervisors and colleagues; the network of relationships of the church seeks to reinforce communication, which is a key element in group unity, and an effective strategy for recognising potential conflicts.

The Institutional Periphery: Ordinary Members

While the hard nucleus of ministers, followed by cell leaders and Timoteos, defines the internal positions in the church authority circles, the largest part of the congregation – about 17,000 members – is located within the large range of what I would call the peripheral community. I use the concept of ‘community’, aware of the historical weight it bears in sociology, to take into account the importance of emotional bonds in the construction of social relations and to emphasise the dimension of belonging to an ‘Us’ that works as a powerful identity anchor and allows the subject to speak about himself/herself and his/her environment. The peripheral nature of the community, in turn, refers to a specific form of relationship between the institution and the members. From the megachurch’s point of view, there is the possibility of establishing a fringe area, flexible and even indefinite, where one can belong and recognise oneself as in the ‘Gospel’ without fully complying with the religious restrictions and requirements of the Christian model of life. From the subject’s point of view, there is the possibility of negotiating one’s identity, establishing a ludic, changing and ambiguous relationship with the church’s identity markers.⁵ It is an inter-structural position where the members are betwixt and between the institutions. It is possible to recognise a state of transition in the domains of periphery, at least in the terms with which King of Kings defines the ways of belonging. In this sense, and when compared to the circles of authority, the peripheral position enables a larger margin for action in the game of appropriation of symbols and practices.

The organisational structure of megachurches defines a range of possible positions that contribute to the active construction of an institutional periphery where the act of belonging contrasts with the roles of the specialist and the frameworks of apprentices or committed members that make up the heart of every church. Indeed, the periphery tends to reinforce the institutional survival of the church: the hierarchical position of religious authority is configured in the game of relations that differentiate it from, but also balance it with, its congregation. Ministers and cell leaders require a community that recognises and confirms them in their sanctity; that builds what Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2004, p. 164) calls a community pattern of validation of belief. Periphery is that grey area where participation and belief become intermittent, selective, complementary. It is the space where the figures of the pilgrim and the convert converge, according to Hervieu-Léger (2004); where some processes of belief individualisation are consolidated, as Fortunato Mallimaci points out (2008, p. 128) when referring to ‘vague religion’, to ‘believing without belonging’ or to ‘Catholics my way’.

In the Evangelical world, these are the Christians who attend more than one church at the same time, combining multiple institutional memberships; or who maintain practices of Catholic origin (taking part in pilgrimages, venerating saints and the Virgin Mary); or who turn to healers or alternative therapies (yoga, reiki, reflexology); or who maintain their faith in the country's native beliefs; they are the ones who come along with an Evangelical friend or relative, who are in the process of conversion but have not yet received public baptism or attended spiritual meetings; and also the ones who, despite having taken these steps, attend cell meetings or the School of Life only sporadically. Lastly, these are the members who, despite having incorporated the schemes of perception and disposition of Neo-Pentecostalism, choose a more solitary and spiritual experience of faith. In every case, the conducts that give priority to complementarity, combinations and selective reappropriation over the more or less standardised models of megachurches do not refer to the ontological condition of the subject, but to the historical experience of an individual who employs negotiating and distancing strategies for various different aspects of daily life: work, emotional life, free time, consumption. Periphery, as a space of dynamic relations, is constantly redefined as it represents the point of encounter between the Christian identity model that the institution builds and the subjective forms of appropriation of the system of beliefs. It is always relational and dependent on the game of continuities and breaks both with the figure of the religious specialist and with the figure of the man from the street foreign to Christian principles.

The Problem of Representation and the Problem of Discourse

I shall now focus on analysing two matters related to the scope of Neo-Pentecostalism in party politics and the position that leaders occupy in this. The first, which I shall call the problem of representation, refers to the obstacles that appear within the Evangelical world to speaking about the gap that exists between the ministers of megachurches and the Christian politicians who claim to represent the whole Evangelical community in Argentina. The second, which I shall call the problem of discourse, relates to the production and spreading of points of reference where collective claims crystallise and project into civil society. More generally, my conclusions present an approach to the political potential of Evangelical discourse in the margins of the institution, focusing on the growing importance of the intermediate area, which I discuss in the eponymous subsection above, and the possibility for those in this area to introduce innovations in their churches.

The Problem of Representation

The unity of the Evangelical movement depends partly on its ability to design and maintain its own mechanisms of representation: a more or less stable system of designation of authorities that act in the name of other people, organisations or institutions. Political groups and churches build different systems of organisation, with their own hierarchies, beliefs and institutional rites; they thus have their own legitimacy. One of the purposes of my research was to identify different positions of subjects according to the place they occupy in the church's network of relations. The distinction among the 'hard nucleus', the 'intermediate area' and the 'peripheral community' deals precisely with the tension and conflict among the different positions, and poses the adoption of the cellular system as a model to integrate members across the spectrum. The 'cells' contribute to the acknowledgment of

internal authorities and to a certain correspondence in terms of representativeness among the three positions.

The important point here is that representation is not spontaneous, but the result of active construction requiring the use of definite strategies and methods: for example, the training stages offered by the School of Life and the School of Leaders or the ritual experiences where a common definition of reality is constructed. It is possible to apply this strategy of constructing representation to the relationship between ministers from small and large churches and the Evangelical representatives who find their way into party politics and take part in their projects and campaigns. I would emphasise the fact that that the articulation between the two realities is not automatic, nor necessary, nor expected: it depends on effective action aiming to create intermediate stages for participation.

The ministerial domains that churches delimit, bearing the imprint of every minister, cannot be directly extrapolated to the domains of political play. Accumulation of resources in one area – material and symbolic goods, social networks, human capital, knowledge – does not automatically imply accumulation in the other area. There are, of course, means of interchange (power, money, influence, knowledge) that every relatively differentiated organisation can put into circulation. However, the possibility of making effective the interchange of resources between party politics and Evangelical churches requires an effort of articulation between the two domains, bypassing the underlying competition for leadership of the religious community. That is why, so far, megachurches have tended to be reluctant to participate in the political system. Because they have not developed institutional mechanisms of representation and interchange with the traditional parties, to expose themselves directly to politics as religious institutions is to risk their credibility within a social field governed by different rules. The level of involvement of Evangelicals in party politics is still low since they are aware of the inner competition between ministers of megachurches and religious congressmen who claim to be representative of the whole Evangelical community in Argentina. Taking a recent example, when the political group Values for My Country (*Valores para Mi País*) was launched in 2009, headed by Cynthia Hotton⁶ from King of Kings, as an Evangelical congresswoman she started warning about the conflicts that may arise with ministers and their rejection of party politics. The two are separate fields, with different structures and timetables, whose correspondence is problematic since the direct encounter between churches and parties may result in mutual loss of legitimacy. As Hotton said in an interview some time later, when she was asked about the relationship between religion and politics: ‘I don’t think that institutional relations between a political party and a religious organisation are a good thing. . . . The Bible can be read from the Left or from the Right: you can’t stand on any political position from the Biblical point of view’ (Peiró, 2009). In Hotton’s view the ‘Gospel’ emerges as a political discourse that is beyond ideology, and thus to restrict it exclusively to only one party is to lose the symbolic potential of religion as a founding discourse, the giver of ‘ultimate’ meanings as its values are presented outside history.

In Brazil, following Ari Oro’s hypothesis (2007, pp. 587–89), it is possible to find strong homologies between the immanent models of politics and of religion, as far as seeing to individual needs is concerned, creating lines of continuity between the congregation and the electoral base. In Argentina, by contrast, churches and federations do not have, for the moment, a comprehensive strategy for selecting political representatives. As a consequence, there is a constant competition between ministers and Christian congressmen for the representation of Evangelicals. That is

why it is so difficult to convert Evangelicalism into politics. In Brazil the mediating role of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (*Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus* (UCKG)) allows the formation of an 'Evangelical caucus', solving the problem of representation through internal mechanisms which are selected and prepared by leaders in order to include candidates over the entire ideological range. Freston (2001, pp. 11–59) and Machado (2006, pp. 27–47), among others, use the term 'church corporatism' to refer to the monopolistic way in which this exercise of selection is done. By contrast, Argentinean Neo-Pentecostalism presents, at least in this regard, a feature in common with the Chilean experience as described by Fediakova (2002, pp. 37–39). The dimension of social change is 'from the bottom up', from the church to the individual, from the individual to the family, from the family to civil society, from civil society to the state. As we see from another study (Algranti, 2010c, pp. 216–23), politics and religion works here at the margins of the party system, creating social bonds and spaces of participation through the cells. Megachurches are becoming more and more significant in their own community and in their neighbourhoods, but they still cannot reach party politics at an institutional level.⁷

Following these ideas, we may say that Hotton's political group Values for My Country aims to become the mediator between the party and the church; but this project is not simple, because megachurches run the risk of losing the prestige they have achieved in the religious area or of introducing new divisions and competitions inside their community. Claudio Freidzon, for instance, does not seem willing to expose the symbolic capital of King of Kings by testing its effectiveness in producing discourses, images and practices about the sacred on the basis of unilateral alignment with a particular political sector. The stages this church builds are different: they refer more to politics 'from the bottom up'; the prevailing features are resocialisation of the subject, creation of environments of sociability, social work, education, leader training and the discursive production of the need for change. There may be individual compromises, and these are often encouraged, but for the time being not on an institutional level. This is why the first obstacle facing unity is disparity between parties and churches, between the potentially rival figures of the minister and the Evangelical politician. We should not let the similar class origins of these positions lead us to suppose that they are the same, nor to suppose that the 'Gospel' simply reproduces a new form of clientelism, reducing politics to a mere exchange of resources for votes, as Bastian describes it (1997, pp. 167–71) when referring to the 'politics of praise and gift'.

The Problem of Discourse

A second problem relates to the demands placed on church members when they are encouraged to participate in politics. Some discourses circulate, at least in King of Kings and other networks of formal Neo-Pentecostalism, giving a positive value to the world as an environment of action where Christians may – and some leaders say 'must' – be included, participating in its power structures. This is without doubt one of the main differences between Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal groups (see the studies by García-Ruiz on 'theology of the Kingdom') (2006, p. 179). However, when the time comes to make this potential real in terms of party politics or in the form of a social movement with a presence in the public space, the Evangelical strength, so evident on the congregational level, seems to vanish. In my view this phenomenon is explained not only by the disparity in the forms of representation mentioned above, but also by the problem of demand or political agenda.

It is interesting that the organisations such as ACIERA that assume the spiritual representation of the Evangelical universe and the Evangelically-oriented organisations that set out to act in the political environment both tend to reinforce content historically related to religious minorities in the main principles they state. These include, in first place, freedom of religion, opposition to drug and abortion legalisation, and rejection of homosexual civil union. In the second place, the political agenda shows a more social character, such as criticism of media violence and calls for combating crime and poverty. These aims correspond to an Evangelical ethics that focuses on protecting the Christian family model and attacking phenomena that appear as deviations from or potential threats to this. They thus establish an agenda discussing moral matters which is based on what the church leaders teach about the needs, more spiritual than social, of their community. However, as recent research has shown (Mallimaci *et al.*, 2008; Algranti and Schencman, 2010), the church members' position does not always coincide with their representatives' ideas, even on matters about which a general consensus is assumed, like abortion, homosexuality or extramarital sexual relationships. The gap between the representatives and the represented on the religious level will probably be reflected in the political arena. Here, the Evangelical discourse may install the idea of returning to a practice based on transparency, honesty, search for consensus, respect of others. This is the tendency that some studies (Fonseca, 1998; Machado, 2006) recognise in the participation of the UCKG in Brazilian democracy, and which Argentina may replicate.

The moralisation of political discourse does not in itself, however, imply that the Evangelical movement is united in its demands. In fact, the collective Evangelical discourse shows surprising difficulties in articulating more urgent political demands in social areas such as redistribution of wealth, housing, minimum salary, education, work, safety, health or retirement services. The language of 'Gospel' incorporates elements from self-help, from psychoanalysis, from marketing; but it does not succeed in 'speaking politically', beyond the historical demands of the religious minorities or the individual strategies a local leader may apply. This, in my view, sets a decisive limit. The logics of collective identity construction from a populist approach requires, in turn, the incorporation and spiritualisation of the existing claims from both the dominant and the dominated sectors in order to be effective in political terms. When religion mechanically copies politics it arguably tends to lose its specific identity. Historical experience shows that the confessional party model has not necessarily been able to attract votes from members of that confession, as shown by early studies on Argentinean Pentecostalism (Miguez, 1997, 1998), but this does not mean that the Evangelical discourse cannot spiritualise social claims on the basis of religious precepts. Let us not forget that the sense or value a signifier carries depends on the way it is retroactively fixed in a position in the entire chain. As Laclau states (2006, p. 657), the process of construction of a political subject requires partly a transformation of 'claims' into 'requirements': moving demands that can contribute to create group identity by defining a common enemy and establishing an antagonistic border inside which the group recognises itself. In this specific sense, 'the name becomes the foundation of the thing' – signifiers are freed from signifieds, and the act of naming takes a privileged place in identity construction (Laclau, 2005, pp. 131–50).

Possible Ways Forward

Since the economic default of the Argentinean state in 2001, which was followed by one of the most serious social crises in the country, the political discourse of

Evangelicals has tended to emphasise the need for an increasing involvement of Christian leaders in society's power structures: that is to say, a stronger presence not only in politics but also in the economic elites, the media, the universities, the government. However, in my view the problem of discourse represents an important obstacle, which has not been carefully analysed in academic discussions, about the potential for political participation on the part of the Evangelical movement in Argentina. If this discourse does not achieve a certain flexibility and incorporates social claims – and it may never do so – there is little chance for the Evangelicals to produce an impact capable of confirming or shaking the power structure in society.

One important idea of leadership,⁸ circulating largely in King of Kings and in formal Neo-Pentecostal networks, is the call to be 'the second most important man in Egypt': introducing people of influence into the power structures of society (government, culture, media, politics, corporate environment, education, social assistance, the health system). For the time being, it is the discursive production of a 'call' to occupy positions of authority that may or may not be achieved in the future, through the use of specific strategies.

Another way forward might be through prophets, who are sociologically conceived as representatives of the most heterodox positions in a religious cosmos at certain historical moments. Such people might be capable of producing new meanings or reactualising old ones, or of introducing social determinations in accordance with the political urges of our times. Otherwise, the evident risk of becoming assimilated to party structures increases, bearing out premonitions such as those of André Corten (2001, p. 151), who saw the difficulties for the emergence of a 'new language which institutes politics'. Following this line, I would argue that it is important to understand the ability to produce 'prophetic meanings' of those in one of the fastest-growing positions in recent years: the 'intermediate area', the leaders.

Conclusions

We have seen so far that the political potential of the Evangelical movement in Argentina, headed at present by Neo-Pentecostal groups, resides not in the centre, but in the margins of democratic institutions (parties, Parliament). Its greatest strength today lies not in party action or the formation of a bloc of congressmen, but rather in its ability to build spheres of socialisation where the circulation of discourses about the need for social change and the leading role of Christians in this process is possible. The leader figure is charged with significant relevance as an active subject in the transformation of society, the model of a new man or woman willing to make a difference in his/her daily spaces of integration. Here, two distinctive features of leadership stand out. The first one refers to the structurally ambiguous position that the intermediate area occupies in the morphology of megachurches. As we saw earlier, the leader is an intermediate figure between the minister (specialist) and the more or less peripheral attendant (lay). The leader's position embodies the structural contradiction between the exercise of ministerial duties inside his/her cell or group of cells, and the absence of symbolic and material acknowledgment in comparison to the members of the hard nucleus in the religious institution. It is worth mentioning that only the intermediate area occupies a structurally ambiguous position: it may function as an essential link for the integration of the community's membership networks, reproducing the messages and discourses of the hard nucleus; or it may introduce innovations depending on its relationship with the group's needs and its desire to project itself in the institutional structures and beyond. This second feature

does not take us to the morphological level of leadership, but to the level of ‘ideas’ that support and guide action.

When we speak about megachurches and the question of leadership, we should not underestimate the effects that the images of the world created by religions have: specifically, their ability to influence people’s behaviour. From here stems the importance of paying attention to the ‘historical efficiency’ of ideas (Weber, 1998a, p. 86), regarding not only the explicit work of orienting daily life, but also, and especially, the unwanted consequences of action, that is to say, the unforeseen results which the motivational basis of religious ethos may have. In the context of this article, this means that Neo-Pentecostal efforts to build an intermediate area, with its training stages and its influences, supported by a discourse encouraging subjects to change the ‘world’ of the power structures, may result in multiple forms of intervention, still underlying, which may impact on the secular spheres of society. As an analogy we may cite, for instance, the way the spheres of participation of integral Catholicism (Mallimaci, 2008) in Argentina – such as Catholic Action, for example – contributed to the formation of political groups during the 1960s and 1970s. Dynamic overlaps,⁹ as one of the possible structuring logics of the social sphere of religions (Algranti, 2010c, pp. 31–37), presents a wide field of reciprocal influences where the ‘Gospel’ can condition and be conditioned by the messages of the ‘world’. At present the privileged fields of intervention are mainly popular culture, education, social assistance and the labour market, and, little by little, party politics. In any case, it is important to pose the question about how Christian leaders being trained now will in the future develop social trajectories marked by the Neo-Pentecostal ethos.

Analysing Christian leadership, I would also suggest that the intermediate position occupied by Timoteos, cell leaders and cell supervisors suggests an interesting area of study: about the scope of ‘prophetic discourse’ within the universe of practices and representations of megachurches. By ‘prophetic discourse’ I mean the sociological ability that certain agents have, by virtue of their position in the church’s networks, to introduce innovations in the symbolic areas where the identity of a religious group is crystallised. Here the possibility of producing new meanings or re-elaborating existing ones is brought into play, when it comes to offering explanations to simplify and channel social experience. The question I would like to pose refers to the underlying potential of this growing group to solve, or at least propose solutions to, the problem of representation and the problem of discourse in the Evangelical movement.

With regard to the first problem, that of representation, I might suggest that the ‘intermediate area’ is the one which carries the greatest potential possibility of achieving a mediating role between political–religious groups like Values for My Country and ministerial work in megachurches. It is the cell leader, not the minister, who has the greatest possibility of receiving benefits from his/her participation in politics. It is important, however, to remember that this link is still weak, because of the competition between the two domains and because of the absence of a mechanism of representation.

With regard to the second problem, that of discourse, we should ask whether leaders are able to introduce new senses to the historical claims of the Evangelical movement. This means going beyond the scheme of protesting for their religious rights and against the state’s attempt to regulate them, which marked their public presence during the 1990s, according to Alejandro Frigerio and Hilario Wynarczyk (2008, pp. 236–50). This means reappropriating other political demands: spiritualising social claims, giving a new religious basis to the already over-determined symbols of struggle like poverty, inequality, housing or health: competing against the Catholic intention to publicly

monopolise these demands. As the intermediate areas succeed in Evangelical groups, there are greater possibilities of their acting as 'transmission belts' among the religious meanings they manage by training and experience, the members' needs they know from their cell work and their will to renew the political play.

To sum up, I would say that the real impact of Evangelical politics in Argentina is not within the party system and the Congress, but in the margins of political institutions: that is to say, in the development of vast congregations internally organised in cells where leaders hold the most active positions in the religious organisation, heading their own groups of believers and constantly encouraging them to participate in society's power structure. The dynamic of this impact is still not clear. For the moment, Evangelicals do have an increasing presence in public spaces, as I noted at the beginning of the article, but they are finding difficulties in reaching party politics. Recent attempts like Values for My Country are still very fragile and do not have a strong influence in the party system. The difficulties of building a bridge between megachurches and political movements are related to the lack of a mechanism of representation, and to a political agenda distant from urgent social demands. In this context, I consider that the intermediate area of cell leaders is in a better position than the hard nucleus of ministers and the peripheral community to resolve the difficulties of converting Evangelicalism into politics.

Nevertheless, the fact that a great part of the responsibility to make the religious movement a heavier political subject lies now on the 'Christian leaders' does not tell us anything about the ideological inclination that they may have. The options whether the leaders contribute to keep the sacralised order of the structures of inequality, or whether they promote new political ideas where the dominated may find alternative channels of expression and demand, or (always the more complex case, but closer to reality) whether both orientations combine, are constantly redefined depending on the interests of the group which succeeds in hegemonising the signifier 'Evangelical' in a specific historical context.

Notes

- 1 According to the latest national survey conducted in 2008 by the Department of Society, Culture and Religion at CONICET, Evangelicals today are 9 per cent of the population, in a cultural context in which Catholics predominate (76.5 per cent) and a significant number of people are indifferent to religion (11.3 per cent). Evangelicals are thus the largest religious minority in the country. This is a relatively new phenomenon and raises questions about the relationship of Evangelicals with politics. CONICET (*Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas*) is the main public institution for the promotion of science and technology in Argentina.
- 2 The main purpose of this study was an analysis of Evangelical views on politics, focusing primarily on the forms of religious orientation towards society developed by Neo-Pentecostalism and the spheres of social participation offered by megachurches located in middle- and upper-class sectors in the city of Buenos Aires. The project was financed by a doctoral grant from CONICET. The project was awarded another scholarship by the University of Santa Barbara, through the Fulbright Program, for the completion of specialised seminars in 'religious pluralism'. The main conclusions of this study were published in 2010 in the book *Política y religión en los márgenes: nuevas formas de participación social de las mega-iglesias evangélicas en la Argentina (Politics and Religion in the Margins: New Forms of Social Participation of Evangelical Megachurches in Argentina)* (Algranti, 2010b).
- 3 The information was gathered in the following years: about services and cell meetings in 2006; about the ministries and their activities in 2007; about occasional events in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008.

- 4 In *The Comparative Study of Religions*, Joachim Wach (1967, pp. 135–50) recognises three modes of expression of religious experience: ‘thought’, ‘action’ and ‘community’. He characterises the former, intellectual thinking, through the analysis of myth – which he takes from Ernest Cassirer – and the study of doctrine. The latter can be divided into three different functions: the explanation and articulation of beliefs, the normative regulation of worship and the defence of the beliefs and their relationship with other bodies of knowledge. Among megachurches these three functions of the intellectual expression of religious experience are carried out in cell meetings by the leaders and the Timoteos.
- 5 A recent and suggestive example of the forms that the institutional periphery adopts in religious identities is by the sociologist Damián Setton (2011). His work explores from the perspective of microsociology the spheres of formation of identity projects among the non-affiliates involved in the revitalisation of Jewish orthodoxy at Chabad Lubavitch.
- 6 Cynthia Hotton entered the Congress a few years ago as a member of a right-wing oriented political group, Republican Proposal (PRO). There she created Values for My Country as her own organisation directed especially towards young Christian leaders wanting to involve themselves in politics. Although this group has only a weak presence in the Congress is one of main reference-points for Evangelicals with an interest in politics.
- 7 The comparative study carried out by Paul Freston on the political presence of Evangelicals in 27 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America concludes with a warning about the danger of extrapolating individual cases and turning them into ‘essences’ or development patterns for the various regions (Freston, 2001, pp. 283–84). His approach aims to maintain critical reserve about two types of theory: the theory of conspiracy and the theory of cultural potential. The first of these theories sees the presence of the USA’s right wing in every aspect of expansion of the Evangelicals in Latin America. This connection does indeed exist in many cases, but this theory assumes it as a dominant explanatory factor, leaving out the autonomous appropriations of local evangelism. The second theory resorts to culture in order to explore the scope of the ability of Protestant religions to transform the social environment according to the development patterns that marked their way in Northern Europe and the USA. Both theories turn historical experiences into abstractions that are generalisable in different contexts. In the specific case of Argentina, the formal networks of Neo-Pentecostalism to which King of Kings belongs, along with other megachurches, find at the moment their strategy of political participation in the discourse of unity of the Evangelical movement and in the growing figure of the leader as a subject committed to social change.
- 8 For a wider discussion of this topic see Algranti (2010a).
- 9 Concerning Argentinean Catholic history it is hard to make formal use of the concept of ‘religious field’ proposed by Bourdieu (1971). The assumption of a modern secular society, with specialised institutions and complex division of self-governing social microcosms, is bound to overlook the specific logic of religion in Latin America, where constant affinities, splits and overlaps with politics, the economy and public spaces go beyond the institutional limits.

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