

Religious and Social Assistance in Brazil: An analysis of the Support Networks of Pentecostal Churches in a Brazilian Favela

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Abstract

Last decades in Brazil, an important change on the religious configuration has been made clear. The religious sphere has been characterized by the vertiginous growth of Protestants, influenced by the Pentecostal impact in Brazilian society. This growth affects the Brazilian religious scenery, but it is not limited by the religious sphere. Public sphere has also been influenced and changed by such religion in several ways. One of the ways this influence can be perceived is in the religious action in Brazilian Third-Sector, where Pentecostal Churches have stood out due to their incisive growth, especially among those who are a part of the lowest social strata. Here, the development of support networks carried out by Pentecostal churches in order to assist their members in both material and immaterial forms has shown how religion assists not only in “spiritual matters”, but also in social ones. To enrich the analysis, we develop a research in a favela in northern of Rio de Janeiro state so as to show how such assistance is developed by some Pentecostal churches in a underprivileged social context.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, Religious relevance, Support Network, Assistentialism, Third-Sector

1. Introduction

There are several ways to analyze the forms, through which socialized individuals express their demands in society, seek solutions to their needs, or relate to each other. Among these forms, religion can be a sphere that reveals different demands and strategies to satisfy those demands. When we observe the history of peoples and ancient nations, we can perceive, as Weber (2009) affirms, that the construction of a god is directly linked to the history and economic situation of a people. Religion is an important way, through which individuals express and seek to accomplish their needs. The Weberian considerations about the proximity between a specific group or social class and a determined religion make us realize that religion is not simply an intimate and personal sphere, but social.

Weber (2009) observes that the creation and development of a religion are connected to the needs and desires of a specific social group. Such assertive may be exemplified by his analysis about the development of Judaic monotheism, main influence in modern Christianity and Islamism, which is linked to the need of unification of a nation under the tutelage of a god. Following the same idea, when developing his theses about the spirit of capitalism, Weber (2013) observes the approximation between social groups and religious strands. For example, the bourgeoisie would tend to rationalism and Calvinism asceticism in contradiction with the peasants' attachment to magical Catholicism.

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In Brazil, religion has found a fertile ground to development, once the hopes for a “good life” based on the forms of inclusion available by the existing structures and social institutions have been constantly disappointed, leaving to religion a great space to deal with these problems of inclusion and exclusion from its own perspectives. In this social context, a new religion gains strength. A religion that, differently from every other, was born and developed in the midst of a capitalist society and among the social excluded and marginalized: Pentecostalism.

This article intends to analyze the changes caused by the Pentecostalism in Brazilian society, analyzing the impact that the Pentecostal growth has had in Brazil, observing the changes in religious configuration, the impact in different religious traditions and also how it has impacted Brazilian society in public sphere. Besides that, in order to show how Pentecostalism influences Brazilian society beyond the religious configuration, we share and analyze a research developed in a favela in Rio de Janeiro state so as to understand how Religion goes beyond the “spiritual guidance”, being a resource to acquire material and immaterial benefits.

2. Pentecostalism And Brazilian Society

In Brazil, Pentecostalism achieved considerable success. According to the data of the 2010 census of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), only 8% of Brazilian’s population self-declares “non-religious”. On the other hand, 64,6% self-declare Catholics and 22,2% Protestants (where 13,3% are Pentecostals). However, it is important to observe that, in the last 30 years, Catholic membership has decrease close by one third, while the number of Pentecostals has quadrupled. It is also impressive that, according to IBGE, 6 out of 10 Brazilian Protestants self-proclaim Pentecostals. These data help us to realize that the Pentecostal phenomenon has found hospitality and growth opportunity, making Brazil the “largest Pentecostal nation in the world” (Arenari, 2013, p. 66).

Observing Brazilian censuses in the last decades, it is perceptible the intense transformation of the religious scenario in this society. The table below shows the changes that took place in the Brazilian society since 1940.

Table 1 – Religions in Brazil from 1940 to 2010

| Religion | 1940 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 |
|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Catholic | 95,2 | 93,7 | 93,1 | 91,1 | 89,2 | 83,3 | 73,8 | 64,6 |
| Protestants ⁴ | 2,6 | 3,4 | 4,0 | 5,8 | 6,6 | 9,0 | 15,4 | 22,2 |
| Other Religions ⁵ | 1,9 | 2,4 | 2,4 | 2,3 | 2,5 | 2,9 | 3,5 | 5 |
| Non-religious | 0,2 | 0,5 | 0,5 | 0,8 | 1,6 | 4,8 | 7,3 | 8,1 |
| Not Declared | 0,1 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,1 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,1 |
| TOTAL | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Source: Brazilian Institute of Geo. and Statistics, 2010.

Despite the clear majority of Christians in Brazilian society – 88,8% of the Brazilian population, considering Catholics (64,6%), Protestants (22,2%) and Spiritism members (2%) – the religious changes are characterized by an immense decrease of Catholic membership, vertiginous increasing of Pentecostals and an increasing of Non-religious. In the last three decades (1980-2010), Catholics decreased from 89,2% to 64,6% of the population; Protestants jumped from 6,6% to 22,2% and the “non-religious” went from 1,6% to 8%. From 2000 to 2010, Protestants have grown 5 times more than Brazilian population (61,4% against 12,3%). Of the 42,3 million Protestants in absolute numbers, 25,4 million (13,3%) of Brazilian population is composed by Pentecostals, a much more considerable amount than the Historical Protestants, which account to 4% of Brazilian population.

⁴ Evangelicals are composed by: Pentecostals (13,3%); Historical Protestants (4%) and Other Evangelicals (4,8%)

⁵ “Other Religions” are composed by: Spiritism (2%); Afro-Brazilian Religions (0,35%); Orientals (0,31%) and Other (2,23%).

The major responsible for the exponential growth of the Protestants in the last decade is the Pentecostal success in the country. Such success is not only related to the growth of the Pentecostal churches, but, mainly, to the new way to relate with the transcendent that the Theology of Prosperity has caused in Brazilian society (Mariano, 2011; Boechat, 2007). Even though Pentecostalism is the religious strand with greatest success among popular classes (Arenari, 2013), the Pentecostal message success caused different religious organizations, theologies and doctrines to be affected by the new way they relate with the divine (Lima, 2012). In different levels, with different variations, churches and religions, historically linked to different traditions, have been affected by Pentecostalism, altering not only the message of the religious leader or the service's composition, but also the material, cultural and social consumption of their members (Mesquita, 2007).

One of the reasons for such impact is a new theology that changed the way Pentecostals relate with the divine and with the world around them. This new way to understand God's revelation is the Theology of Prosperity. Nevertheless, before I analyze specifically said theology, it is necessary to observe how Pentecostalism has changed during the years and how this theology was fundamental to the expansion of this religion during last decades.

3. THE "WAVES" OF PENTECOSTALISM

Pentecostalism in Brazil has achieved exponential growth as can be seen in the information above. According to the data of IBGE's census, from 2000 to 2010, Protestants have grown 5 times more than the Brazilian population. Whereas the Brazilian population increased in 12,3%, Protestants have grown 61,4%. Pentecostalism is in the principal responsible for the Protestant growth, with a growth of 44% in the last decade. Even though the Pentecostal growth is lower than the 111,7% increase in the 80s and 115,4% in the 90s, the increase is significant.

However, this religion has not been immune to changes and alterations during the years, being the heterogeneity an important characteristic of the movement. Such changes have been studied and analyzed by scholars and researchers in Brazil and in the world. Studies of Corten (1996), Prandi (1999) and Pierucci (1996) intended to create a classification for Brazilian Pentecostal churches based on the changes that happened to them. Afterwards, Freston (1993) and Mariano (1999) developed the classification of Pentecostalism in three "waves", i.e., Classical Pentecostalism, Deuteropentecostalism and Neopentecostalism. In this article, we use such classification to assist on the analysis of the impacts of Theology of Prosperity on Pentecostalism itself and on other religions in Brazilian society.

The first wave of Pentecostal movement, denominated Classical Pentecostalism, started around 1910 and "reins absolute" until the decade of 1950 (Mariano, 1999). Its beginning is characterized by the arrival of the Christian Congregation (1910) and Assembly of God (1911) churches. These churches spread across the national territory, being mainly composed by poor and poorly educated individuals, who were discriminated for both Historical Protestants and Catholics.

The characteristics of Classical Pentecostalism are directly related to the religious interests and social demands of popular classes. Thus, these churches were characterized by a strong anti-Catholicism, emphasis on the gift of "speaking in tongues" – where such gift was indispensable to take on any leadership role – the belief in the imminent return of Christ and by the radical rejection of the exterior world, resulting in a strong sectarianism and asceticism.

Observing these churches nowadays, one can perceive a relevant difference with those initial characteristics. Although they continue to shelter, mostly, poor and poorly educated strata, they are also composed by middle-class sectors, liberal professionals and businessmen. Nevertheless, even with their almost nine decades of existence, they keep alive the sectarian posture and ascetic ideal (MARIANO, 1999, p.29).

During the 50's, the second "wave" of Pentecostalism began, which Mariano (1999) denominates Deuteropentecostalism. This wave started with the arrival of north-American missionary members of the Church of the Foursquare Gospel in Brazil, where they opened the Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular (1953). Differently from the Classical Pentecostalism, Deuteropentecostalism used mass evangelism, emphasizing the message of divine healing. Besides, they used as an evangelistic strategy the diffusion of gospel message on the radio (method loathed by Classical Pentecostalism, as the means of communication were considered diabolical and mundane), concentration on squares, gymnasiums and theaters.

With a seductive message and innovative and efficient methods, they attracted, besides believers and pastors of other Protestant confessions, thousands of people from the poor strata of the population [...] For the first time, they were able to give visibility to this religious movement across the country (MARIANO, 1999, p.30).

As a result of this new theological emphasis on the divine healing, mass evangelism, and use of means of communication in order to spread the Pentecostal message, new churches emerged, such as *Brasil para Cristo* (Brazil for Christ) (1955), *Deus é Amor* (God is Love) (1962) and *Casa da Bênção* (House of Blessing) (1964). Thus, the divine healing became the main proselytist strategy of the churches that emerged after 1950. Several studies carried out by the end of the decade of 1970 and during 80s and 90s demonstrate that the emphasis in divine healing and the Pentecostal growth, which happened with the gospel crusades, did not happen in Brazil alone. According to several studies of diverse north-American sociologists, the Pentecostal explosion in the United States during 1940s was fueled by the message of divine healing. As a result, Pentecostalism grew in an unprecedented way in the United States, Latin America and Asia (Anderson, 1999; Burgess, 1989; Synan, 1997).

The “third wave” of Pentecostalism, the Neopentecostalism, main responsible for the social, political and cultural impacts in Brazilian society, propitiated a significant theological and practical rupture with Classical Pentecostalism and Deuteropentecostalism. As I tried to show before, there were changes between Classical Pentecostalism and Deuteropentecostalism. However, those changes cannot be compared to the ones which were caused by the impact of Neopentecostalism. Between the first two “waves” of Pentecostalism, the main differences were: 1) the theological emphasis, once the divine healing became the center of the religious message and 2) the proselytist strategies, because the means of communication became an important tool to spread the evangelistic message.

On the other hand, theologically and practically, the core remained the same. Such core is formed by the belief on the imminent return of Christ, constant preaching about the coming paradise, anti-Catholicism and the belief in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, besides the strong asceticism and rejection of the “world”. From the theological point of view, the main change was the emphasis shift from the “gift of tongues”, promoted by the “first wave”, to the divine healing, defended by the Deuteropentecostalism.

In relation to the religious practices, Deuteropentecostalism inaugurates a new strategy to the “conversion of new believers”, i.e., the before rejected means of communication, especially the radio, became an important way to spread the divine message and acquire new believers. However, if we consider the whole social and cultural “evolution” of Pentecostalism, it becomes clear that the biggest rupture, whether it is theological or in the relationship with the “world”, comes with the “third wave” of Pentecostalism, i.e., the Neopentecostalism, which will be analyzed as it follows.

4. Neopentecostalism

The “third wave” starts on the second half of 1970, and during the following decades fortifies, reaching a growth of 111,7% in the 80s and 115,4% in the 90s, being the main responsible for the Protestants in Brazil to go from 5,8% of the population in 1970, to 22,2% in 2010. Following the immense growth of Pentecostalism, the number of churches had also increased exponentially. According to the *Servindo Pastores e Líderes* (Sepal), in 1970 there were 26.125 Protestant churches in Brazil; four decades later, there are around 289.701 Protestant churches in the country (Sepal, 2012). Certainly, it does not mean that all churches are considered Pentecostal, but such impact must not be ignored.

To be considered a Pentecostal church, specially a Neopentecostal church, there are some characteristics that have to be observed. However, there are some problems that need to be taken into consideration when evaluating the Neopentecostal movement.

Firstly, there is no practical homogeneity among the churches and leaders of the movement. Some of them are sabbatical; others forbid relationships and were not supervised by the church; some do not allow their members to listen to secular songs or to watch secular movies, and others prohibit divorced individuals to take over leadership roles. Besides that, the Neopentecostal impact goes beyond the opening of new churches and communities. It has also influenced different religious organizations, whether they belong to a Historical Protestant tradition or Catholic tradition. All this influence causes Mariano to affirm that “the process of ‘Neopentecostalization’ is unavoidable” (Mariano, 1999).

Among the researchers and scholars who develop analysis about the Pentecostalism, there is consensus that Neopentecostalism is the main responsible for the changes in Brazilian religious field and the principal responsible for the political, cultural and social impacts caused by religion in Brazilian society in last decades (Oro, 2003; Jungblut, 2005; Freston, 2010; Mariano, 2011). These scholars point out several characteristics of Neopentecostalism and of the Neopentecostal churches such as political participation, business structuration of the churches, use of marketing strategies to spread church work, contemporary prophets, freedom for “emotive expression” and use of objects to mediate the relationship with the divine. Currently, after some decades for the movement to grow mature, it is possible to affirm, that the three main characteristics of such movement are those which have influenced not only the organizations directly linked to such movement, but also other spheres of Christianity in Brazil, such as Historical Protestantism and Catholicism. The three main characteristics are: Theology of Prosperity, Spiritual War and Flexibilization of Habits and Customs.

Before moving any further, it is important to highlight a particular characteristic of Neopentecostalism, which makes this movement unique in Brazilian history. The Neopentecostalism was the religious strand that made the best adaptation into Brazilian reality, being developed on the demands of the population in modern periphery. If the Catholicism and Historical Protestantism keep linked to the northern theologies, doctrines and practices, as those are European and North-American religions, the Neopentecostalism has developed its theology, doctrines and practices from the demands of the tropical population, making such religion easily assimilated by the Brazilian individuals of urban peripheries.

Thus, despite based on a theology imported from North-America and adopting doctrines and practices from other religious practices, Neopentecostalism adapted them to Brazilian reality, this being an important proselytism. Besides such factor, the success of this strand is guaranteed by a new theology that answers the demands of individuals who are part of a capitalist world, i.e., Theology of Prosperity.

5. Pentecostal Impact On Brazilian’s Christianity

Besides the Pentecostal growth in last decades, another important Pentecostal impact is related to its influence on religious traffic in Brazil. The table below demonstrates how Pentecostalism growth comes from the migration of believers of different Christian strands, not only the conversion from different religions.

Table 2 - Current Religion x Religious traffic

| Current Religion | Never Changed | Changed | % Population |
|----------------------------|---------------|-------------|--------------|
| Catholic | 95,9 | 4,1 | 67,2 |
| Historical Protestant | 22,8 | 77,2 | 4,1 |
| Pentecostal Protestant | 14,4 | 85,6 | 13,9 |
| Other Religions | 10,7 | 89,3 | 3,4 |
| Non-Religious ⁶ | 19,7 | 80,3 | 8 |
| Total Average | 68,3 | 23,5 | 100 |

Source: Bartz, 2012

According to the data of the 2010 census of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), represented on the Table above, 23,5% of Brazilian population have already changed religion, whereas 68,3% remain on the same they were raised. Nevertheless, 95,9% of the 68,3% are Catholics, i.e., Catholicism is the only religion in Brazilian society that can be considered a “born into” religion, i.e., made up by people who are raised Catholic. Thus, Catholicism stands out as the only Brazilian religion that is made up by people who never changed religion.

Taking Catholicism out of the equation, we observe that 82,8% of Brazilian individuals have already changed religion. That is why it is possible to affirm that, except for Catholicism, Brazilian religions are composed by individuals who have converted to them during their lives. At least three quarters of the Protestant population or Non-religious have already been part of another religious creed during their lives. For example, out of the 13,3% of Brazilian population who self-declare Pentecostal, 85,6% of them have converted to Pentecostalism during their lives, and only 14,4% are raised in a Pentecostal family, what makes this religion a religion of “converted” individuals.

⁶“Other Religions” are composed by: Spiritism (2%); Afro-Brazilian Religions (0,35%); Orientals (0,31%) and Other (2,23%).

As most of Brazilian religions are made up by “converted” individuals, it is necessary to identify how Pentecostalism affects such traffic. The next Table helps us identify what religions the individuals have wandered before becoming part of the membership of their current religion.

Table 3 – Current Religion x Previous Religion.

| Previous Religion | Current Religion | | | | |
|------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Catholic | Historical Protestant | Pentecostal Protestant | Other Religions | Non – Religious |
| Catholic | 0,0 | 13,8 | 58,9 | 16,3 | 42,1 |
| Historical Protestant | 26,9 | 21,3 | 50,7 | 1,1 | 5,7 |
| Pentecostal Protestant | 18,7 | 40,2 | 40,8 | 0,4 | 23,9 |
| Other Religions ⁷ | 47,4 | 9,9 | 15,5 | 11,0 | 6,4 |
| Non-Religious | 17,9 | 1,2 | 74,2 | 5,5 | 0,0 |
| Atheists | 23,1 | 11,8 | 33,2 | 15,8 | 16,1 |

Source: Bartz, 2012.

Despite being a religion of “born into” individuals and being in constant decline, Catholicism receive individuals previously Pentecostals (18,7%), Historical Protestants (26,9%) and from Afro-Religions, Oriental Religions and Spiritism (47,4%) and Non-religious (17,9%), even though this last religion makes up for only 4% of the Catholic membership. The adherents of Historical Protestantism tend to migrate to Pentecostalism (50,7%), Catholicism (26,9%) and other Historical Protestant churches (21,3%). The research identifies that 13,8% of the Historical Protestants have already been Catholics; 11,8% have already been Atheists and 9,9% have belonged to Other Religions. The internal migration is also relevant, for 21,3% of these adherents remain on the same religious movement.

The Non-religious group (7,8%) represents the second largest contingent of people who changed religion. The Pentecostals and Catholics are the main suppliers for this group. 42,1% of Non-religious declare they have already been Catholics, 23,9% Pentecostals, 5,7% Historical Protestants and 6,4% declare to have been part of Other Religions. Considering the Atheists, 33,2% have migrated to Pentecostalism, and so have 15% of once Non-religious. Lastly, regarding the Pentecostals, the information above ratifies the thesis that Pentecostalism is the “universal recipient” when analyzing Brazilian religious traffic. Of the 85,6% of “converted” individuals who make up for the Pentecostal religion (only 14,4% are raised Pentecostals), 40,8% come from churches from the same segment (Pentecostals), while 58,9% were once adherents of Catholicism and 50,7% belonged to Historical Protestant churches. On the other hand, only 33,2% of Pentecostals have previously been Non-religious, what allows the conclusion that most Pentecostals transit through different segments of Christian faith.

Therefore, analyzing the data from IBGE’s census of 2010, it is perceptible that the Pentecostalism impact is stronger on Christian religions (Catholicism, Historical Protestants and Other Pentecostal organizations) than on Non-religious. Moreover, the analysis of the Theology of Prosperity demonstrates that the Pentecostal impact does not result only on the formation of new churches and organizations, and on the increase of Pentecostal membership. It has also influenced theological and doctrinaire changes happening inside Catholic and Historical Protestants churches. Inside the Catholic church, the most significant impact caused by the theology of Prosperity can be observed on the formation of the Catholic Charismatic Renovation Movement (Movimento da Renovação Carismática Católica) (MRCC) (Mariz, 2003).

⁷ “Other Religions” are composed by: Spiritism (2%); Afro-Brazilian Religions (0,35%); Orientals (0,31%) and Other (2,23%).

The “Catholic Pentecostalism” began after some young people who gathered to pray with north-American Pentecostals received the “baptism with the Holy Spirit” and were presented with spiritual gifts. This influence gave birth to a Movement that seeks to “renew” the Catholic church through a spiritual revival, occasioning “new ways to pray, worship and relate with God” (Lopes, 2008). Nevertheless, Mariz defends that the MRCC goal is wider: Although the MRCC is organized as a movement and is considered a movement by the Church, this was not and is not its project, as it is clear in its leaders’ declarations. The Renovation does not want to be another movement inside the Church, but intends to transform the Church itself, from the inside out (Mariz, 2003, p. 5).

Despite the criticism received, principally for being a Pentecostal movement, guided by the Theology of Prosperity, marked by long periods of praises and prayers, emphasizing magical experiences and the formation of discipleship groups out of the religion organization, the MRCC is the movement that has achieved larger success regarding religious proselytism, mainly among young people, making the MRCC the “greatest Catholic phenomenon nowadays” (Barret, 2000). The Pentecostal influences can also be seen in the Protestant group. Firstly, the Pentecostal impact generates new churches that used to be linked to Historical traditions, but, because of the Pentecostal influence, created “Renewed” churches, i.e., they keep the ecclesial structure of the Historic churches, but adopted the Theology of Prosperity and Pentecostal doctrines, hindering their continuation as Historical churches. As mentioned before, that is the case of Renewed Baptist church, Renewed Methodist church and Renewed Presbyterian church. Moreover, there are Historical Protestant churches which keep linked to Historical tradition, but institutionalize Pentecostal practices, mainly the Theology of Prosperity, in their weekly services, spiritual retreats and home services.

5.1 Evangelicals in the context of Brazilian third-sector

In the end of the 1980s, and throughout the 1990s, the country went through strong changes, both economic and political restructuring, due to the re-democratization process. The Constitution of 1988 redefined the model of social welfare, allowing the civil society to manage social policies (Burity, 2000). In this context, the Third-Sector emerges, this term is based on the concept of the State as the first-sector and the Market as the second-sector (Souza, 2011). Therefore, in the end of the 1990s, a new concept emerges to refer to an extensive universe of social organizations. Those were non-profit private organizations with public function (Landim, 2003).

In the first moment, the Third-Sector is related to a part of the market as a new form of business action focusing on business philanthropy, through the transfer of resources to social or cultural projects (Landim, 2003). In a context where the reflex of neoliberal politics invades social, political and economic relations, the dismantle of social rights, and the decrease of State responsibility regarding social policies, the presence of non-profit organizations appear as a solution to several problems due to social inequality, substituting the State in such questions.

Until the end of 20th century, in Brazil, regarding the existence of volunteer organizations, the Catholic Church was the main responsible for developing social, health and educational assistance, creating non-profit organizations in partnership with the State (Landim, 2003). After 1930, there is an expansion of State actions regarding the direct provision of services in education, culture and health. Therefore, the first decades of such century were characterized by the propagation of volunteer and independent organizations. And a large number of those kept a strong partnership with the State. “This happened due to the alliance between the State and the Catholic Church, favoring the enormous field of organizations of social actions connected to those” (Landim, 2003, p. 105), favoring, as well, other religions such as Spiritism and the Evangelicals.

We are able to observe the implementation of some actions of Brazilian State that demonstrate relevant changes in social assistance areas, throughout the years, e.g., in 1999, when the legal figure of Civil Society Organization of Public Interest (OSCIP) was created, and established criteria for the legitimacy of a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) to receive support of public power (Souza, 2011). According to Souza (2011), the Brazilian State implemented meaningful changes in assistance area, such as the creation of Brazilian Legion of Assistance (LBA), in 1942, in Getúlio Vargas government; in 1993, it was replaced by the National Council of Food Safety (CONSEA), created during Itamar Franco’s government; in the same year the Organic Law of Social Assistance (LOAS) was approved, and it is written in its first paragraph:

The Social Assistance, right of the citizen and duty of the State, is a non-contributive Policy of Social Security, that provides the social minimum, performed through a integrated group of actions of public initiative and society, to assure the provision of basic needs (LOAS, 1993).

The LOAS also establishes the criteria or requirements for an organization to be considered of social assistance, as it is established on its third paragraph: There may be considered entities and organizations of social assistance, those that provide non-profit services, assistance and attendance to the beneficiaries covered by this Law, as well as those that act in the defense and guarantee of their rights (LOAS, 1993).

In 1995, Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government founded the Ministry of Social Security and Assistance, and in Lula's government, in 2003, the Ministry of Assistance and Social Promotion (MAPS) was created, coordinated by Benedita da Silva, former Senator and former governor of Rio de Janeiro state, and also member of Presbyterian Church. And finally, in 2004, MAPS was replaced by the Ministry of Social Development (MDS), "responsible for the important program of income transfer named Bolsa Família (Family Allowance), initially led by the former Belo Horizonte mayor and Catholic militant, Patrus Ananias" (Souza, 2011, p. 3).

Regarding the participation of religions in social assistance scenery, several entities of social assistance emerged, e.g., the first NGO created in Brazil, in 1961, is named Federation of Social Assistance Bodies (FASE) and it was created by the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) (Souza, 2013). FASE ruptured its religious institutional link in the 1960s. Another "branch" of Catholic Church that develops social works are called social pastorals, they aim to help the sick and physically disabled, homeless, inmates, young offenders, elderlies and underprivileged children. The most famous Pastoral is the Pastoral da Criança (Children Pastoral), founded by the doctor Zilda Arns (Souza, 2011).

Other two Catholic entities stood out, the first one is named C atiras, and it was created by CNBB to work with social assistance. This organization develops programs of assistance to underprivileged families and humanitarian campaigns. The other entity is connected to the Movement of Charismatic Renovation, being known as Life Communities. In these communities, people who are destined to the religious service live together promoting programs of social assistance in group. And the most renowned Life Communities in Brazil are Comunidade Shalom and Fraternidade Toca de Assis (Souza, 2011).

On the other hand, the third most significant Christian strand in Brazil, the Kardecist Spiritism was founded in 1857, by French pedagogue Allan Kardec. It arrived in Brazil around 1960 and its most renowned representant was Brazilian medium Chico Xavier (1910-2002). According to Souza (2011), Spiritism in Brazilian society found legitimacy and received great respect due to its social activities, creating and maintaining many organizations of social assistance. And, lastly, and most relevant for this paper, the Evangelical, or Protestant, insertion in social assistance area in Brazil. Such insertion takes place in various and different forms. Among them, there is the creation of interdenominational NGOs, created by Historical Protestants, such as Coordenadoria Ecum nica de Servi o (CESE); Associa o de Apoio   Crian a e ao Adolescente; Funda o Luterana de Diaconia (FLD); e, Rede Evang lica Nacional de A o Social (RENAS) (Souza, 2011). And also the Industry of Hope, linked to the Bethany Presbyterian Church, of pastor Caio F bio (Machado, 2001).

Among the Traditional Pentecostals, there is the predominance of assistance actions based in the collect and distribution of food, clothes and medicaments to underprivileged people who live near the areas where the temples are built (Souza, 2011). The Assembly of God, for example, on a national level, created the National Council of Social Assistance of the Assemblies of God (Machado, 2001), also having, on a local level, organizations of smaller sizes, as Andrade (2010) showed in a researched developed in Pernambuco where the Assembly of God manages at least three institutions, the Joel Carlson Association, which provides medical, psychological and funeral assistance to those in need; the Betel Nursing Home, which shelters abandoned elderlies; and the Project SAMUEL, which offers health, education and medical assistance for three thousand children in Pernambuco (Andrade, 2010). Among the NeoPentecostals, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) created the Christian Charity (ABC), recognized as organization of public utility in 1997. Through this organization, the UCKG received and managed donation of food, school material, clothes and hygiene items; promoted courses, campaigns and supported social projects linked to non-religious instances (Rosas, 2012).

Nevertheless, due to a series of accusations of corruption, the regional unities were closed in the end of 2000s. However, the UCKG continued to develop its assistance programs through partnerships with the Brazilian Association of Social Assistance and Development (ABADS) and with the Instituto Ressoar, social branch of Rede Record, second largest Brazilian television network (Rosas, 2011).

It is important to highlight that the practice of social assistance via Third-Sector or non-profit organizations in Brazil has presented, since the very beginning, a strong connection with religious institutions, beginning with the Catholic Church. The hegemony of the Catholic Church regarding the social assistance in Brazil starts to change in the middle of 1980 due to the sharp Pentecostal growth that took place in the country. That is when the Evangelical Churches started to question the Catholic “favoritism” by Brazilian State. Nonetheless, the Evangelical Churches were not defending the State laicity, but the sharing of governmental support to different Christian churches (Mariz, 2011).

Thus, the deregulation and depoliticization of social policies reinsert in the public agenda the relevance of philanthropic actions, which are traditionally associated with religious practices (Burity, 2000). Different types of associations emerge, religious associations, NGOs created by the middle-class, and popular associations linked to the communitarian associativism (Avritzer, 2012). These civil associations allowed a new political insertion. These associations are usually philanthropic and are characterized by the strong participation of religious people, using the public morality values, solidarity, ethics and defense of human rights as their political argument (Burity, 2000; Mesquita & Sierra, 2008). This heterogeneous group of non-governmental entities created as an initiative of the civil society which composes the Third-Sector has grown and expanded its capacity to promote public policies, re-interpreting the very idea of charity (Souza, 2011).

The assistance of churches finds controversy among the researchers. One group understands that is the lack of citizenship that allows this kind of religious action, since the work developed is mainly philanthropic, practicing assistance as charity. Another group observe in the churches a potential for social mobilization, able to answer social demands and contribute to the fight against poverty (Almeida, 2006; Almeida & D’Andrea, 2004; Mariz, 1991). Moreover, several important analyses on the assistentialist practices developed by churches have been carried out, also showing how such practices are related to “charity” and “volunteer work”. Said analyses show that these practices are present in different religions, such as Catholicism and Spiritism, since the very beginning (Souza, 2011). And they would appear later in other religions, such as the Protestantism, due to the religious growth linked to the conversion of people from lower social strata (Mariz, 1991). Therefore, charity as a component of several religions “demonstrates the moral duty of help to those in need, something that is fulfilled through multiple actions, such as social works.” (Souza, 2011, p. 195).

According to Machado e Mariz (2007), the volunteering or charity practice presents different perspectives in each religion. For example, in the Catholicism, it is understood as “expression of God’s love”. Giving one’s time, working in the church, or helping the needy is a religious virtue. On the other hand, according to the same authors, in the Protestantism, such practice is not seen in the same way. Donations, for the Protestants, aimed to fulfill only the material needs of the individuals, and would not be seen as a practice of sacrifice or religious virtue. It means that living through charity is not a virtue, because the protestant individual must follow his vocation and serve God with his secular profession. In this way, the Protestant considers he would please God and would not have any needs, only those who could not work to survive deserved donations. And, according to Mariano (1999) the Protestant members of Neopentecostalism, based on the Theology of Prosperity, understand that the believer is destined to be prosperous, happy and healthy in this world.

However, historically, social assistance carried out by the Pentecostals has been characterized by their charitable practices, i.e., through the mutual help of church members (Souza, 2013) focusing, specifically, in donation of food, medicaments and clothes. In general, even though some religious institutions develop social assistance through philanthropic action, it is possible to observe two basic action possibilities of religious groups action in this matter a) small initiatives organized in congregations or spiritual centers, which keep the traditional charitable profile and b) social projects kept by relatively autonomous organizations to the worship centers – para-ecclesial, NGOs, civil associations of several kinds – where there is a fertilization through an insertion in the networks of social action linked to participative and citizenship-promoting discourses and social inclusion (Burity, 2007). Thus, it is possible to affirm that several religions have increasingly presented actions focused on social problems in order to explain, through a spiritual point of view, the earthly problems. And, in this field, the Pentecostal Churches have stood out due to their incisive growth, especially among those who are a part of the lowest social strata. (Silva, 2009).

6. THE CASE OF THE ASSEMBLY OF GOD

The support networks analyzed on this research are inserted in a very particular social context which gives it its specialty. This research focus on the Assembly of God (AG) in a favela in the northern part of Rio de Janeiro state,

named Favela Matadouro, and it is everything that involves the daily life in Brazilian favelas, and how religion is related to it, that gives this research its importance.

In Favela Matadouro there are three Assembly of God churches which assist their members in several ways, i.e., AG Honrando a Palavra, AG Ministério Madureira, AG Campo de Missões. In a context of lack of public resources, poverty, lack of public policies that benefit the residents, etc., the churches take an approach which is not only spiritual, but also of material exchanges (payment of debts, food baskets donation, etc.) and immaterial exchanges (information exchange, support in various moments, etc.) of resources among the members of the churches. These churches work so as to solve the most basic needs of their members with the help of both the members of the church and the pastor, forming a circle of “mutual help”.

Regarding the AG Honrando a Palavra, it was possible to observe that the “help” provided by this church can be understood as “material help”, because it is mainly focused in food distribution, e.g., basic food baskets distribution to homeless people in the areas near the church. However, for the last couple of years the church has not distributed food to any person, i.e., due to the economic crisis that the church has been facing, and the monthly struggle to pay basic bills, such as light and water, the church has only distributed food to the members who contribute with tithes and offerings.

AD Ministério Madureira develops another type of “help”. According to the church’s pastor, the church aims to provide both “material and immaterial” help. However, it does not focus only on church member, but on those who approach the church seeking help. Then, the church donates food, medicine, and send those who need to rehabilitation clinics. On the other hand, the pastor makes clear that such help is not given without a strong triage and assurance that those who receive help are really in need.

AG Campo de Missões develops a type of “help” focused on the population of Favela Matadouro. According to the church’s leader, the church develops an evangelization strategy for this favela. Indeed, the church stimulates the mutual help among its members, requesting the donation of food, medicine, allowing its members to sell different kind of products such as food and handmade objects, and also lending the church grounds for birthdays, weddings and funerals. On the other hand, the main focus and direct assistance rely on what the pastor calls “spiritual help”, i.e., the evangelization and spiritual guidance provided by the church.

It is important to point out that the term “help” we use in this paper can be understood as an assistentialist practice offered by these churches to the favela residents. Therefore, the actions of the Pentecostal churches in this research present an assistentialist feature instead of a social assistant one because the “help” provided by the churches for the relief of everyday suffering of the residents of Favela do Matadouro does not intend to completely emancipate them or defend and guarantee their rights, whether social or political rights.

Nevertheless, the assistentialism put into practice by the Assembly of God churches of Favela do Matadouro may not help with the direct poverty reduction or social protection, but said assistentialism affects said reduction somehow principally when the Pentecostal actions focused on one portion of the needy population help to reduce their basic needs. Therefore, it is possible to observe in this research a very similar result than the one observed by Souza (2013): the social assistance developed by the Pentecostal churches have been characterized by its charitable practices, i.e., through the mutual help of the church members, focusing on the donation of food, medicine and clothes.

Therefore, it is possible to affirm that such “actions of help”, or assistentialist practices among the Pentecostals, there is a “circulation of benefits”, and such practices occur through “support networks”, because this type of network focus on the contacts among individuals, their sociability, and it is built on the social relations and the bonds among each favela member or resident. For example, the favela resident who is not a member of the church and is in need of something, needs to know somebody from the church to intermediate the relationship and acquire the benefit.

The “support networks” have interactional features. Thus, the AG Honrando a Palavra presents a more “rigid” support network structure, since there is a direct relation between being a member of the church and receiving some benefit from the church. It means that if a person is a member of the church and participates in the religious activities, is always present and contributes to the church, the church will provide help in case this person has any needs. So, the “support network” established by this church depend on a high frequency of the contacts, and they endure for as long as the person is a member of the church.

In AG Ministério Madureira, the existent “support networks” present a “looser” feature, because it is not necessary to be a member of the church to access some benefit. And in AG Campo de Missões, the “support networks” are better intertwined, since they form a very united community, but they also present a relation of reciprocity between a member of the church and the acquirement of a benefit in a moment of need.

Undoubtedly, the pastor of each of the AGs has a prominent position in this relations, being the “we” of these “support networks”, being responsible for stablishing the “confidence bonds” with their members, once the assistentialist practices circle among them via food and medicine donations and help to pay any minor debt, as light and water bills. Besides that, all three churches use their own resources, since all the pastor deny having any kind of connection with other institutions, like NGOs, public power, entrepreneurs, politicians, etc. Thus, the Assembly of God churches in Favela do Matadouro act beyond the “spiritual guidance”, contributing, along with the residents of the favela, through a social work, i.e., through “material” and “immaterial” help carried out in support networks.

7. Conclusion

As we tried to demonstrate, contemporary Pentecostalism is a religious phenomenon that surpassed the theological and doctrinal limits not only of Classical Pentecostalism, but also of Protestantism as a whole. Theologically, Neopentecostalism has spread the use of a theology that is not based on “reformed” or Arminian principles. On the contrary, such theology emphasizes a kind of divine revelation that connects God to capitalist society. Moreover, Neopentecostalism broke away from the Christian doctrines that distinguished the Protestant believer, not only “accepting” the world, but also sanctifying it and bending it to the believer’s will. As a result, this new religious strand promoted important changes on Brazilian’s religious field, propelling Protestant growth and making Pentecostalism the principal Protestant strand in Brazil.

Indeed, Pentecostalism has grown beyond the limits of the temple walls. Besides the religious impact, Pentecostal churches have also impacted the Brazilian Third-Sector in relevant way. As we tried to show, several religions have increasingly presented actions focused on social problems in order to explain, through a spiritual point of view, the earthly problems. And, in this field, the Pentecostal Churches have stood out due to their incisive growth, especially among those who are a part of the lowest social strata. And that is exactly what the research presented in this paper pointed out, i.e., Pentecostal churches act beyond the “spiritual guidance”, contributing, along with the residents of the favela, through a social work, i.e., through “material” and “immaterial” help carried out in support networks. Therefore, Religion is not only linked to a search for a better future and a hope beyond this life, it is indeed deeply linked to the everyday need, to the daily struggles and search for answers. Thus, analyzing Religion allows us to better understand not only the problems faced by the studied group, but also the solutions it tries to present in order to bring meaning and support to the existing social context.

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