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Leandro L. B. Fontana
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Political Pentecostalism

Summary and reflection on the online conference
28th to 30th July 2021

German Bishops' Conference Commission on International
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Foreword

For more than thirty years, the German Bishops' Conference has observed the dynamic spread of Pentecostal churches in the global South with interest and also with concern. A number of studies bear witness to this commitment. As Catholic Church, we should try to understand what makes Pentecostal churches so attractive. Obviously, their way to address people, their forms of worship and congregational practices seem to appeal to many.

At the level of many local churches and the Vatican, the Catholic Church is in diverse ecumenical relationships with representatives of the Pentecostal churches. This dialogue includes critical confrontation. As heterogeneous as Pentecostal churches present themselves worldwide, as different are the relations of local Catholic churches with them. Critical inquiries refer e.g. to social-ethical topics like the "prosperity gospel" preached in many places. Another cause for irritation is the public appearance of some Pentecostal actors with an (at least from a Western point of view) unreflected interference in political processes and a disturbingly aggressive style.

In the history of the originally apolitical Pentecostal movement this has been a relatively recent development. This publication summarizes results of the symposium "Political Pentecostalism" (July 28-30, 2021). Once again it becomes clear that the Pentecostal movement does not present itself in a uniform way at all, but shows considerable differences with regard to the way of public engagement, its theological justification and the (lack of) demarcation from authoritarian and right-wing populist currents.

I would like to thank the authors of this paper, Father Dr. Dr. Markus Luber SJ and Dr. Leandro Bedin Fontana, for their summary of the conference results. It can sharpen our understanding of a complex worldwide phenomenon. The topic and the necessary “discernment of spirits” will continue to challenge us also in the Catholic Church.

+ *Bertram Meier*

Bishop Dr. Bertram Meier
President of the German Bishops' Conference Commission for International Church Affairs

1 Introduction

1.1 A changed political situation

A broader consensus seems to be emerging about the crisis-ridden nature of our age, the most obvious symptoms of which are in the realm of politics and the public sphere. In recent years, the global public has seen a new kind of communication architecture on the political stage, whose broad resonance, it seems, is due to the “staging” of both a new political ethos and a new societal discourse. Populism, right-wing authoritarianism, anti-democratic movements, polarised societies, intolerance of ambiguity, believing in conspiracies are some buzzwords often associated with this phenomenon. Although these terms are hardly useful for a well-founded analysis due to their vagueness, they are nevertheless indicators of a profound change which experts from various disciplines have captured by means of different diagnoses and analyses and for which they have suggested a variety of patterns of solution.¹ But both in the question of overcoming and in the attempt at a comprehensive interpretation of the crisis, the answers turn out very differently. Can we say, for example, with Andreas Reckwitz, that we have reached a point where some promises (of modernity or liberalism) have been exposed as illusions? ² Or are these nothing more than anomalies that could be overcome by resorting to means such as “communicative reason” (Habermas)? There is no clarity on this at present.

A closer look at the profound political change in many regions of the world also reveals that not only new discourses are co-determining political events, but also new political actors are appearing on the political scene with determination. These include not only “politically incorrect”

¹ Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis*, New York 2018; Fukuyama, Francis. *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, London 2018; Andreas Reckwitz, *Das Ende der Illusionen: Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur in der Spätmoderne*, Frankfurt am Main 2019; Philip Manow, *(Ent-)Demokratisierung der Demokratie*, Berlin 2020.

² Reckwitz, *Das Ende der Illusionen*.

political forces and those once characterised as populist, but also new religious actors who are contributing to this change in political culture. The majority of these political activists are associated with Pentecostal Christianity, although their political intentions are also flanked by Evangelicals and, in part, by Catholics.

Although more comprehensive research is still pending, it can nevertheless be stated that Christians around the world are increasingly becoming politically active, and they are doing so from a faith-based motivation. In this context, the religious signature of their political engagement massively challenges the current regulation of the relationship between religion and (secular) politics. The observation that current political discourses are worldwide increasingly religiously coloured raises questions both about the global transformations of Christianity and about the validity of the Western paradigm in the determination of the relationship between society and religion. Both aspects are of great interest for a theology that claims responsibility for the world.

1.2 The “Political Pentecostalism” Research Project

Against the backdrop of political developments and as a continuation of the scientific examination of the Pentecostal movement, the research unit “Political Pentecostalism” was created at the Institute for Global Church and Mission in 2019. The research interest was directed towards the appropriate definition of the phenomenon, taking into account the different contextual conditions, with a special focus on the theological motives that are used to legitimise the new orientation in world relations. On the one hand, this concerns the aspect of shaping the field of tension between religion and politics with regard to the publicly perceptible confrontations of these new actors with their secular or non-Christian-minded interlocutors, which occur both in political, religiously coloured, post-secular discourses and in their religious-political Engagement. With the aim of approaching the phenomenon as comprehensively as possible, the second research focus is on the theological motives that legitimise and correspond with the reorientation in the re-

lationship to the world and the changed religious identity that is expressed in public appearances or through socio-political activities.

In the first step of the project, an intercontinental bibliographic review was carried out, which draws on the expertise of five Pentecostalism researchers widely recognized in their respective contexts.³ This bibliographic review is limited to the global South and includes Africa, Asia and Latin America. In addition, for each of these three continents, the study also focuses on a country or case study where political Pentecostalism finds a particular expression. Accordingly, the studies deal with the countries Nigeria, the Philippines and Brazil. Andreas Heuser and Ebenezer Obadare were entrusted with the contributions on Africa/Nigeria. The study on Latin America/Brazil was prepared by José Luis Pérez Guadalupe and Brenda Carranza. The Asian and Philippine context was analysed by Jayeel Cornelio.⁴

In a next step, the international conference “Political Pentecostalism” was planned and carried out on the basis of the results of the bibliographic review. An international team of scholars examined the phenomenon from different perspectives. The findings of the conference and the results of the bibliographic review will flow into a meta-analysis and will be published separately. The analysis identifies central categories in their contextual references, with a specific interest in the significance of theological motifs.⁵ At this point, it is important to pay attention to the theological relevance. In view of the preponderance of

³ This bibliographic review was published as OpenAccess and can be accessed via the publisher’s website: Leandro L. B. Fontana / Markus Lubert (Hg.), *Political Pentekostalism: Four Synoptic Surveys from Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Weltkirche und Mission 17), Regensburg 2021, https://www.verlag-pus-tet.de/sites/pustet.verlagsweb.de/files/publications/politcal_pentecostalism.pdf

⁴ The short vitae of these scholars can be found in the last section of this publication.

⁵ This macro-analysis, together with the contributions to the conference, will be published shortly under the following title: Leandro L. B. Fontana / Markus Lubert (Hg.), *Politischer Pentekostalismus: Transformationen des globalen Christentums im Spiegel theologischer Motive und pluraler Normativität* (Weltkirche und Mission 18), Regensburg (published by Friedrich Pustet).

primarily sociological and political studies of religion or cultural studies, the analytical integration of theological motifs makes a considerable contribution to understanding these religious realities. In doing so, the significance of theological normativity in this religious practice and conceptual cosmos can itself become the subject of academic work. In this respect, both theological and secular sciences benefit from an interdisciplinary exchange. Furthermore, dealing with the topic in an ecclesiastical-theological context also requires a theological-normative evaluation. In addition to the fulfilment of the scientific standard of unconditionally capturing reality, there arises, in this context, the necessity for theological reflection. The latter is to be produced within the horizon of the church's responsibility for the world and having as a criterion the connection between truth and justice in accordance with the Gospel. The evaluation, however, must take place within the framework of theological argumentation and cannot be determined by ecclesiastical sensitivities.

For many participants during the conference, the debate was not limited to an interest in religious studies, sociology of religion or political sciences, but was also oriented by a pastoral and ecumenically motivated desire for clarification. Since it was only possible to devote a limited amount of time to these questions during the conference, a virtual workshop is planned to complement the conference. Entitled "Pentecostal Political Engagement and Social Transformations. Pastoral and Theological Challenges", this workshop is intended to bring the pastoral implications even more to the fore.

1.3 A long-term project of the German Bishops' Conference

The project "Political Pentecostalism" was planned for two years and was funded by the German Bishops' Conference Commission for Global Church Affairs. The project was neither the first nor the only project on this topic funded by the German Bishops' Conference. The Scientific Working Group for Global Tasks of the Church, commissioned by the

German Bishops' Conference had already been concerned with the phenomenon of the Pentecostal Church movement since the 1990s.⁶ In the course of the following years, further empirical and context-specific studies were conducted with reference to Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America.

These efforts culminated in 2013 in an international conference sponsored by the German Bishops' Conference, where the research results were discussed by scholars and church representatives from twenty countries.⁷ The focus was on the differentiated perception of the phenomenon and the search for the reasons for the appeal of the Pentecostal movement. This was the starting point for reflections on the significance of the research results for the Catholic Church and her pastoral activity.

Further context-specific conferences took place in 2016 in the Nigerian capital Abuja and in 2018 in Guatemala-City.⁸ Scientific publications

⁶ The results of the first such research project were published under the following title: Jean-Pierre Bastian u.a. (Ed.), *Religiöser Wandel in Costa Rica: eine sozialwissenschaftliche Interpretation* (Forum Weltkirche 10), Mainz 2000.

⁷ Cf. their conference proceedings: Johannes Müller / Karl Gabriel (Ed.), *Evangelicals, Pentecostal Churches, Charismatics: New Religious Movements as a Challenge for the Catholic Church*, Quezon City, Philippines 2015; In addition, a summary of the most important results and discussions of the conference is available online: Valentin Feneberg / Johannes Müller, *Evangelikale – Pfingstkirchen – Charismatiker* (Research Results No. 6), Bonn 2014.

⁸ As was the case with the Rome conference above, these two conferences also produced conference proceedings and a summary: Ralph Madu / Marco Moerschbacher / Augustine Asogwa (Ed.), *The Catholic Church and Pentecostalism: Challenges in the Nigerian Context. Proceedings, Presentations & Final Report*, Abuja 2016; resp. Margit Eckholt / Rodolfo Valenzuela (Ed.), *Las iglesias pentecostales y los movimientos carismáticos en Guatemala y América Central, como desafío para la Iglesia católica*, Guatemala 2019; the summaries: Klaus Vellguth, *Die katholische Kirche und der Pentekostalismus: Herausforderungen im nigerianischen Kontext* Research Results No. 10), Bonn 2017; resp. Margit Eckholt, *Der Pentekostalismus und die katholische Kirche in Guatemala/ Zentralamerika: Sozial- und politikwissenschaftliche Analysen, pastorale Herausforderungen und ökumenische Perspektiven. Zusammenfassung*

were produced based on the results of the studies and the meetings. During the meetings, the commitment of the church in Germany was repeatedly praised and the desire for the continuation of the study of the topic was put forward, not least because the Pentecostal movement is in a constant state of change. In particular, it was expressed as a desideratum “that theological questions be discussed in depth in the future” in order to better understand Pentecostal Christians and to be able to position oneself more appropriately in relation to them.⁹ The project “Political Pentecostalism” took up this thread and at the same time laid the focus on new developments of social and political commitment within the Pentecostal movement.

This interest was also clearly visible in the address of the then acting chairman of the Commission for the World Church of the German Bishops’ Conference, Archbishop Ludwig Schick, who emphasised the socio-political concerns of the German bishops within the framework of theological responsibility. He emphasised that the question of an appropriate relationship between religion and politics was important. Thus, he asked quite critically: “What kind of religious influence on politics is necessary and legitimate? Where are the limits and the dangers of mixing both spheres? [...] Even as ministers of our church, we see the obligation to take a political stand when it comes to fundamental questions of human dignity and the just shaping of society. With regard to the political work of the Pentecostal churches, we must ask: Where is the limit of legitimate influence? Where does the influence of religion endanger the successful social coexistence of people of different convictions, denominations and religions – and what, in contrast, corresponds to our mission as Christians to shape society?”

At the Institute for Global Church and Mission, Pentecostalism has also been one of the thematic focal points since the beginning of the Institute. Significantly, the first annual conference of the Institute in 2010

und Reflektion der Konferenz in Guatemala City, 07.–09.08.2018 (Forschungsergebnisse Nr. 13), Bonn 2019.

⁹ Eckholt, *Der Pentekostalismus und die katholische Kirche in Guatemala*, 11.

was dedicated to reflecting on Pentecostalism as a challenge to theology and the church.¹⁰ The transformations of Christian practice worldwide cannot be confined to denominational and territorial boundaries, but require ecumenical and inter-religious relations as a task of missiology. Accordingly, in the course of its existence, the Institute for Global Church and Mission has made every effort to ensure the continuation of the project.

1.4 The Conference

From 28 to 30 July 2021, the 2021 Annual Conference of the Institute for World Church and Mission was held online via the digital Zoom platform. 270 participants from 39 countries had registered. An important concern was to provide a discussion environment for Pentecostalism researchers and other interested parties across four continents. To ensure international communication, simultaneous interpretation was provided in three languages - German, English and Spanish. In addition to professional exchange and discussion of content, the online conference was also intended to serve international and global church networking. To achieve this goal, two additional digital tools were used. The NextCloud chat gave participants the opportunity to ask questions, make comments, initiate discussions and share files and links throughout the conference. In addition, the Wonder platform provided an opportunity to get to know each other informally and to address other participants directly.

The entire organisation and implementation, as well as the moderation of the various forums and lectures, was carried out by the team members of the Institute for World Church and Mission under the leadership of Fr. Dr. Dr. Markus Luber, the acting director of the Institute, and Dr. Leandro L. Bedin Fontana, coordinator of the research project "Political Pentecostalism".

¹⁰ Cf. Tobias Keßler / Albert-Peter Rethmann (Ed.), *Pentekostalismus: die Pfingstbewegung als Anfrage an Theologie und Kirche (Weltkirche und Mission 1)*, Regensburg 2012.

The main aim of the conference was to take account of the Pentecostal movement, specifically from the perspective of their political and social engagement in the three continents of the global South and to work out regional particularities of the Asian, African and Latin American contexts. A thematic orientation was provided by the results of the bibliographic review conducted beforehand. In addition to the authors of the bibliographic review, internationally recognised experts presented the current state of research from various disciplines. Furthermore, the active participation of Pentecostalism researchers, who greatly enriched the reflection with their questions and interventions, contributed to deepening the discussion.

P. Markus Luber SJ underlined in his introduction the high demand of a project designed for global comparison due to the plurality of manifestations and activity patterns of the phenomenon. However, the contrast also represents a strength of the project: “The intercontinental and global comparison from a macro perspective also produces new insights. The approach aims at abstraction in a permanently recursive reference to the individual studies. In this way, global interconnections come to light and local particularities become salient.”

Luber also acknowledged the potential effectiveness of religion in the current worldwide situation of upheaval, which must, however, be effectively shaped institutionally and civically; for despite all ambivalence, the politically and civically engaged Pentecostal movement is a vivid example of religious motivational power. “I am also convinced,” Luber affirmed, “that this motivation [drawing on religious sources] is absolutely necessary in order to cope with the major transformations that we are facing worldwide: Let’s just think of climate change. Against this background, our concern must go far beyond an apologetic interest. Rather, it requires a substantive engagement on a theological level in dialogue with the realities of life.”

Archbishop Schick expressed in his address a similar interest in understanding religious and pastoral processes, pointing out that, in addition to the aforementioned socio-political interest, the reasons that motivate people who embrace this changed religious practice must also be

considered in an unbiased manner. In this context, for example, he asked what questions the shrinking established churches in Europe should ask themselves in the face of the flourishing of Pentecostal Christianity that can be observed worldwide: “Could it be that what many people are missing in their established churches and what causes them to turn away from any religion might have the same root as what drives people to join Pentecostal churches in other regions of the world?” Conceived as an interdisciplinary discussion, the conference offered the possibility to integrate these aspects into the discussion by looking at different contextual forms of political Pentecostalism.

2 The Political Engagement of Pentecostal Actors in the Global South

It has been observed – by way of a preliminary remark – that, at large, just as the phenomenon political Pentecostalism has been characterised by considerable heterogeneity, so too the scholarly attempts at explanation. Depending on which specific contexts are taken into account, the approaches of interpretation also vary. They range from social science approaches that, for example, interpret religious developments in the course of processes of indigenisation and decolonisation, to religious science approaches that, for instance, attribute its cause to doctrinal changes. The assessment of the new religious practice also varies considerably. Some scholarly voices recognise in the irritations it triggers merely another example of Western secular science’s lack of understanding in religious matters, while others establish a link to threatening social developments.

Such interpretative diversity also characterised the contributions during the conference. For example, the opening lecture by Ruth Marshall was delivered in the genre of a wake-up call to the public. The Canadian political scientist subjected her decades of research on Pentecostalism to a kind of revision in view of current developments with regard to

African and US-American political contexts and in the context of Pentecostal churches' reactions to the Covid 19 pandemic. On the other hand, Prof. Giovanni Maltese, a religious scholar from Hamburg, rejected assertions that imply a fundamental tendency to threaten liberal democratic societies by directly inferring an authoritarian style of leadership or theocratic rule from Pentecostal theological discourse. With regard to the Ghanaian context, the theologian Andreas Heuser (Basel / Switzerland) went so far as to say that these actors can even fulfil a stabilising function in society under democratic conditions.

With this cursory insight, it should be noted that differentiation is required not only with regard to the different contexts, but also to the specific disciplinary and methodological approach.

2.1 Pentecostal church involvement against the backdrop of the current political scene

Among the problems Ruth Marshall focused on in her presentation were, on the one hand, the post-colonial striving for sovereignty promoted by Pentecostal churches and, on the other hand, the epistemological crisis currently plaguing Western societies and to which Pentecostal churches are reacting. The issue of sovereignty concerns the relationship between becoming a subject and political agency. Marshall is particularly interested in the question of how much freedom the charismatic ethos of submission tolerates or makes possible. The background to this question is her Foucault-based theory of Pentecostal political spiritualities. Within this theoretical framework, becoming a subject always implies submission (to a state, the law, an authority, etc.).¹¹ Pentecostal Christians would accordingly have “the advantage” that they do not demand submission to a particular, territorial, contingent instance such as the nation state, but submission to God alone. The Pentecostal discipline derived from this opens up greater freedom

¹¹Cf. Ruth Marshall, *Political Spiritualities: The Pentecostal Revolution in Nigeria*, Chicago 2009, 45–48.

and expanded possibilities for action, especially in postcolonial contexts. Along these lines, Marshall recognises a significant point of view to explain its attractiveness. However, in her eyes, Pentecostal leaders tend “to increasingly monopolise the charisma or pastoral power”¹², creating worrisome relationship of dependence with authority figures.

The Latin American theologian and social scientist Brenda Carranza also takes up the Foucauldian idea of pastoral power in her lecture by also looking at how people deal with authorities, which she calls “pastoral and parliamentary elites”. Her concerns are directed at an “intolerant attitude” and an “anti-democratic logic” that she identifies in these groups, notwithstanding the fact that they abide by the rules of the democratic game in order to become “new political actors”. In this respect, the attributions “intolerant” or “anti-democratic” are neither formal nor content-related categories. Rather, they express a habitus (Bourdieu) that is fed as much by the social struggles of a demographic and identitarian minority as by the ideas of the so-called dominion theology (the concept of dominion theology will be presented in more detail in section 2.3).

Carranza’s concerns are closely related to what Marshall refers to as “epistemological crisis”, which ultimately indicates a crisis of authority. Marshall traces it back to the inability of these churches “[...] to establish a form of institutional authority that guarantees orthodoxy.” Instead, the institutional dimension is stabilized by individually exercised authoritarian forms of power. For Marshall, this is related to the fact that in the Pentecostal worldview, problems of all kinds are spiritual in origin, with the result that pastoral power is inevitably concentrated in

¹² Foucault defines pastoral power as “[...] a form of power which does not look after just the whole community, but each individual in particular, during his entire life.” This form of power, practised in Christianity, was then integrated into the state apparatus during the emergence of modern Western states, so that the latter became concerned with the well-being of each individual. Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Subject and Power*. Afterword, in: Michel Foucault: *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 2nd ed., Chicago 1983, 208–26., here 214–215.

the hands of experts of the spiritual world who, by virtue of their spiritual expertise, can also claim authority over secular, social, political and individual matters. According to Marshall, more attention needs to be paid to this fact in Pentecostalism research and in the wider public.

However, it was not only the contributions from Latin America that put forward the concept of elites. Referring to the African context, the Nigerian sociologist Ebenezer Obadare, for example, used the term “theocratic class”. The term refers to the “cohort of powerful Pentecostal pastors boasting enormous social capital, deep pockets, formidable transnational connections, and political clout.” Despite the resources at their disposal, however, Obadare says their power to shape policy should not be overestimated. In concrete terms, the balance sheet for Nigeria after two decades of Pentecostal governments is rather sobering in view of the numerous promises. In his eyes, the “theocratic class” does not differ significantly from conventional politicians in the pursuit of their interests. Even in the Chinese context, which presents completely different conditions for public religious activities, the Filipino sociologist Jayeel Cornelio notes the emergence of a Christian, affluent class. Since it supports the church formation of the Chinese diaspora abroad, for example, there is a possibility of influencing the Chinese government.

Against this backdrop, Andreas Heuser’s theological analyses of the transnational networks of Pentecostal churches and their “new hierarchies”, whose institutional nodal points he identifies as “megachurches”, are instructive. In this “network Christianity”¹³, the authority of the megachurch leaders is exercised primarily performatively¹⁴ through anointings or the laying on of hands, and not by virtue of their office, as is the case in the traditional Christian churches. Rather, their authority is primarily based on their charisma, which in turn is materially demonstrated by the size of their church, the number of daughter

¹³ Based on Brad Christerson / Richard W. Flory, *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders Are Changing the Religious Landscape*, New York 2017.

¹⁴ On the concept of performativity, see below section 2.2.

churches and status symbols that make their social and political standing and influence visible. Externally, spiritual legitimacy forms the basis for elite networks, strategies of co-optation of other non-Pentecostal political actors and immunisation mechanisms as instruments of political activity (see above). Internally, the hierarchical relationships created by anointment establish, for example, that less influential pastors are under the protection of more influential ones. The protégés also express their loyalty through financial commitment.

These first outlines may give the impression that this phenomenon, which is called “political Pentecostalism” in the context of this research project, is primarily about power and influence, with anti-democratic, even theocratic tendencies. Without intending to categorically exclude these aspects, Maltese showed that this widespread perception lacks a sound empirical basis. In his contribution, he rather put up for discussion the thesis of whether there is an inherent connection between spiritual warfare and anti-democratic, right-wing authoritarianism. In doing so, the Hamburg-based religious scholar criticised a distorted reading of Pentecostal political engagement in the global South that is prevalent in the global North. Instead, he directed attention to the interests that different (religious) actors pursue under certain circumstances. Based on ethnographic research conducted in the Philippines, Maltese presented Pentecostal actors who, morally conservative, use the militant grammar of dominion theology, which will be discussed below, but at the same time advance “democratic and socio-politically progressive practices”. Maltese’s criticism is directed at interpretations and orientations of Pentecostalism research, which, due to stereotypical patterns of perception, does not get a look at alternative forms of political action. By recognising Pentecostal believers as “mere reproducers of a supposed US-American political theology” and denying them “any agency”, these models of interpretation promote a colonial template of thought. Based on this diagnosis, Maltese locates the cause of problematic developments in the global North:

“For it is such North Atlantic Eurocentric knowledge production that

ultimately promotes ‘de-democratising forces’, as it cements the discursive constraints that leave morally conservative people little option but to ally themselves with the political right if they want to be taken seriously and actively participate in political debates.”

This approach was contradicted by the contribution of the Peruvian sociologist José Luiz Pérez Guadalupe, who perceives a significant change in the political engagement of Pentecostal church actors, which he characterises by the distinction between “evangelical politicians” and “political evangelicals”:¹⁵

“While evangelical politicians, within the framework of the democratic rules of the game, primarily strive for the common good, political evangelicals primarily pursue the interests of their religious group, i.e. they act in the political arena as a religious interest group.”

Accordingly, “political evangelicals” are apparently concerned with “confessionalising politics”, i.e. making their religious views the norm for the whole of society. This is also the reason why the so-called “moral agenda” occupies such a prominent place in public discourse. Moreover, this is offered by the “political evangelicals” as the only “political agenda” for the nation. Not infrequently, at this level, their goals combine with the intentions of conservative Catholic circles, creating a kind of “political ecumenism”. The emergence of transdenominational alliances in the field of “public morality” was a central category in the other contributions as well.

2.2 Societal transformations

On the second day of the conference, the phenomenon was approached primarily from a sociological perspective. To this end, Carranza took up the currently much discussed concept of “public religion” in Brazil to

¹⁵ This formulation brings to mind another problematic aspect that this study also highlights, namely the diverse nomenclature that varies considerably from context to context. While these actors in Africa and Asia favour identity markers such as *Pentecostals*, *born-again* or simply *Christians*, in Latin America they usually operate under the designation “*evangélicos*”.

shed light on three aspects of the Pentecostalism phenomenon in Latin America in general and in Brazil in particular. In the first part of her presentation, the sociologist traced the path of Pentecostal actors towards positions of power in different spheres of society. In doing so, she explained the concept of “political actorhood” as one of the core elements of the concept of political Pentecostalism. In the second step, she described the “minoritisation strategies” of Pentecostal churches. This refers to the phenomenon that these churches, which used to be a discriminated minority themselves, now publicly discredit other religious and sexual minorities after gaining political influence. Third, like Pérez Guadalupe above, she pointed to an “ecumenical rapprochement” between Pentecostal, Evangelical, Catholic and Protestant leaders and the new political right. This centres on the intention to advance the establishment of a neoliberal and conservative agenda in Brazil.

Jayeel Cornelio also noted “ecumenical” alliances in the Philippines, where, unlike in Latin America, the main actors are (conservative) Catholics. There, too, the alliances come about especially with regard to moral questions, which are the subject of public action. In his view, a “public morality” belongs to the three pillars that make up “political Pentecostalism” or “engaged Pentecostalism”. Civic welfare and party-political participation are the other pillars. In contrast to terms such as neo-Pentecostalism, progressive Pentecostalism or political Pentecostalism, the Philippine sociologist made a case for the term “committed Pentecostalism”, as this expresses the integration of the three areas and the active participation of Pentecostal Christian believers in the transformative shaping of their societies.

The commitment to such a public morality was assessed quite positively by Cornelio. He primarily recognises in it the basic concern for morality, which cannot be limited to individual decisions but concerns societal-national dimensions. The normative dominance that Carranza and Pérez Guadalupe considered problematic for the Latin American political landscape was not seen by Cornelio as threatening social cohesion. In his eyes, the use of militant language patterns within the framework of a Manichaean worldview in public debate is not sufficient to claim a

causal connection.¹⁶

Another characteristic of Asian engaged Pentecostalism that should not be left unmentioned at this point is the concept of soft power developed by him. Against the backdrop of Asia's disparate political landscape with different forms of government, situations arise, such as in China or North Korea, in which direct political engagement by religious actors is inconceivable. In these cases, however, charitable work carried out by churches can generate social and political capital that allows them to enter into negotiations with governments or elites of the country or even to exert transnational geopolitical influence.¹⁷

A contrasting example to the Asian political scene was described by the Nigerian sociologist Ebenezer Obadare. The focus of his contribution was the thesis that the rise of Pentecostalism in Nigeria did not just coincide temporally with the birth of the Fourth Republic (1999-), but that there was a reciprocal influence. Obadare traced the path of Pentecostal church actors to political power and illuminated the central aspects of their religious-political appearance ("performance") in public. In doing so, he introduced another central category into the reflection of the religious phenomenon, namely performativity. The term is relevant for understanding religious contexts insofar as it focuses on the sphere of the realization of faith, as opposed to the cognitive dimension of faith contents. Religious practice includes forms of "enacting", for example in liturgy, that engage the whole person. Typical forms of publicly bearing witness, healings and anointings are never merely individual affairs, but follow a script that serves to assign believers a role in the

¹⁶ Cf. Jayeel Cornelio, *Engaged Pentecostalism in Asia: civic welfare, public morality, and political participation*, in: Leandro L. B. Fontana / Markus Lubert (Hg.), *Political Pentecostalism: Four Synoptic Surveys from Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Weltkirche und Mission 17), Regensburg 2021, 136–186, here 155–156. See also the section on spiritual warfare below.

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 155.

divine economy of salvation.¹⁸ The focus is on speech acts and their effectiveness in creating and shaping reality. An essential component of the strategy is the symbolic use of power. According to Obadare's statements, the fact that this is a politically effective instrument is clearly shown in retrospect by the last two decades in Nigeria, during which Pentecostal actors very actively shaped the political scene in the country. In contrast to real politics, symbolic politics primarily aims at imaginary identification, and the relationship between politicians and their electorate is based on symbolic communication. Against this backdrop, politicians function, as it were, as a "reflection surface" onto which voters can project their ideals. The special feature is that the logic of symbolic politics allows politicians to operate "independently of reality". A performatively adopted attitude is considered authentic, genuine and immediate, as contrasted with functional professionalism, which is associated with formalism and aloofness, in a word, with indifference towards people. Obadare used public performative acts of former presidents Obasanjo and Jonathan to exemplify this approach. Public prayers, the remodelling of the presidential palace by setting up a prayer chapel or repeated visits to different megachurches where they were blessed are elements of a performative piety that turned out to be efficient political tools. Furthermore, Obadare mentioned critical voices

¹⁸ The scholarly use of the term performativity originates primarily in dramaturgy and theatre studies. With regard to Pentecostalism and religious studies, it can be observed that in recent years they have increasingly applied the methods of theatre studies to their research, in order to be able to take the attractiveness of the new forms of Christianity into account more comprehensively. (cf. Abimbola Adunni Adelakun, *Performing Power in Nigeria: Identity, Politics, and Pentecostalism*, Cambridge/New York 2021, 8–9). The meaning of performativity presupposes a correspondence between a consciously executed action and an idea, a script, a plan. Essential components of this action are the script, the scenario, the actor/actress with the role he/she has to fulfil in the story, and the audience in front of whom the action is performed with the intention of exerting an impact on them. (cf. Carlson, Marvin, *What is performance?* and Goffman, Erving, *Performances: Belief in the Part One Is Playing*, both in: Henry Bial / Sara Brady [Ed.]: *The Performance Studies Reader*, 3rd ed., London/New York 2016, 72–76 resp. 61–65).

that recognise not only forms of staging here, but manoeuvres to distract from political failure.

2.3 Theological justification of Pentecostal political engagement

Performance forms an essential part of Pentecostal religious practice in political contexts. In addition to anointing and laying on of hands, one sees prayer campaigns, casting out of demons, healings and miracles as well. The background is the framing of political action by the ideas of spiritual warfare and warfare prayer.¹⁹ These are religious activities that make the power of God, expressed in “signs and wonders”,²⁰ effective for the present. According to Andreas Heuser, the performative practice and its ideal foundation are linked to the question of legitimate exercise of power as central elements of Pentecostalism with the institution of mega-churches. Based on his studies in the African context and a case study from Ghana, Heuser argued that the grammar underlying “political Pentecostalism” is the so-called dominion theology. This combines the above-mentioned spiritual warfare, a politics of anointing and prophetic voting, and is also characterised by a combative habitus. Several questions about this martial language were raised during the conference, as it obviously caused irritation among the participants. According to Heuser, this striking language must be understood in the context of a Manichaean worldview that recognises the world as a battlefield where good and evil spiritual forces fight each other or as a struggle against “principalities and powers of the devil”.²¹ The connection between political space and spiritual spheres is shown in territorial determinations, because these principalities can be geographically mapped

¹⁹ This list mainly takes into account the phenomenology on the political scene and does not cover the whole spectrum of Pentecostalism.

²⁰ Alluding to the seminal work for Pentecostal churches in the 1980s: John Wimber, *Signs and Wonders and Church Growth*, Placentia 1984.

²¹ An Image from Ephesians (6:12), “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (KJV).”

through prayer and special abilities (spiritual mapping). Along these lines, it is possible, by means of spiritual warfare, to win over “whole social groups – such as entire nations”²² in order to expand the Kingdom of God.

The militant images and combative language correlate in turn with apocalypticism as a related field of Pentecostal Christian spirituality. Prof. Gunda Werner illuminated from a dogmatic perspective different waves of apocalypticism in the course of Jewish-Christian history, starting with biblical images, via currents of the Reformation, especially Pietism, to the Pentecostal movement of the 20th century. In the process, the Graz-based dogmatic theologian identified a gap between highly rationalised theological discourse and religious piety, which may be regarded as a religious void and thus as highly conducive to the development of apocalyptic symbolism and expectations of the near future. According to Werner, the relationship of this symbolism to a Christian-motivated political commitment lies in the appeal and plausibility of dystopian images and narratives from the reservoir of apocalypticism in crisis situations. Notwithstanding the legitimacy of apocalyptic images, which are biblically documented in both the Old and New Testaments, Werner made it clear that these should by no means lead to a distortion of the Christian image of God. After all, the Christian message is ultimately about a “[...] God who wants salvation, not disaster”.

In addition to the theological interpretation of crisis experiences, reinterpretation plays a decisive role in two respects. For one thing, one observes a shift of the “spiritual warfare” from the individual level to the whole society or nation, and, for another thing, a temporal shift of the spiritual warfare from the (eschatological) future to the here and now. In this context, this reinterpretation is referred to as an “over-realised

²² Peter Wagner, Why You Must Take Dominion Over Everything, in: Charisma Magazine, 05.12.2012, <https://www.charismamag.com/spirit/prophecy/15402-the-case-for-dominionism>. The US theologian Peter Wagner is considered one of the main founders of dominion theology.

eschatology”.²³ It contrasts the theologoumenon “eschatological reserve”, which defines the relationship between history and completion in classical theology. Heuser points to the megachurch milieu as the promoter of this eschatological shift. Dominion theology can be especially discernible as dominion eschatology, which is realized as “pneumatic theopraxis”. The distinction between the classical Pentecostal movement and the current Pentecostal megachurch network is not trivial in this context. In addition to Heuser, the other speakers also pointed to the worldwide significance of the megachurches as epicentres of the changed Pentecostal-Christian relationship to the world. For Heuser, they fulfil the task of spreading the theology of dominion on a global level. With regard to the political and public sphere, this has far-reaching consequences. Through their transnational infrastructure and powerful communication media (internet portals, news agencies, publishing houses, apps, radio and television stations, etc.) they have a considerable reach. They have become venues where public opinion is formed, which in turn are attractive for political actors. In his “theopractical” case study, Heuser referred to the presidential elections in Ghana, where Pentecostal prophets tried to exert influence by choosing favourites based on divine revelations. In addition to such “theopraxes”, Heuser named the elements of elite networking, co-optation strategies and immunisation mechanisms already known from the Latin American context as further essential features of megachurch political engagement.

The Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong took an alternative look at the theological motives of the dominion theology, without ignoring the problematic aspects of megachurch hermeneutics. He made a point of drawing attention to the plurality of the phenomenon. He laid the biblical-theological foundation for a Christian understanding of politics

²³ Cf. Stephen Hunt, *Forcing the Kingdom: The “Over-realised” Eschatology of Contemporary Christian Post-Millenarianism*, in: Stephen Hunt (Hg.), *Handbook of global contemporary Christianity*, vol. 2: *Movements, Institutions, and Allegiance* (Brill handbooks on contemporary religion 10), Leiden/Boston 2016, 245–275.

and underlined the social relevance of these movements as an alternative *civitas* that, by making recourse to other social, political, cultural and economic principles, fulfils a prophetic role. The starting point of his political theology was the Lukan double work.²⁴ According to Yong, it is worth noting that in both the Gospel and Acts, the evangelist Luke frames the narratives with political events and dates, thereby presenting Jesus' message as embedded in a concrete political context. Yong's real focus, however, was on the observation that the experience of the apostles can also be interpreted politically. From the perspective of an apostolic hermeneutics, therefore, any form of political theologising is to be appreciated, for it "[...] allows a greater degree of intentionality about the ways in which, as scripture reveals, the spiritual dimension interfaces with the political." In response to questions from the audience about the problematic aspects of "prophetic voting", prophecy or other political claims justified theologically by direct reference to divine revelation, Yong pointed to the fundamental need for public contestation. In this context, he made a clear invitation to other Christian churches to engage in dialogue with Pentecostal Christians to promote processes of discernment. The goal must be to participate in the search for God's will relative to an appropriate responsibility towards the world, instead of dismissing Pentecostal Christians as mere fundamentalists or false prophets.

2.4 Pastoral challenges

The developments shown in the comparison of the three continents make it clear, despite all contextual differences, that Christianity is in a time of fundamental transformation. In this context, numerous pastoral questions arise. Even though the challenges for pastoral practice were not among the main focuses of the conference, an international panel with different church actors took place to share experiences in this regard. Among the panellists were Charles Bertille, Executive Director of

²⁴ His explanations are based on his political theology, which was published under the following title: Amos Yong, *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology*, Grand Rapids, Mich 2010.

the Bishops' Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei and Caritas Malaysia, Fr. Dr. Lawrence Nchek-wube Nwankwo, Catholic priest at St. Paul Parish, Uguwoba, Nigeria, and lecturer at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Sr. Dr. Cecilia Son, pastoral associate at the Catholic International Parish of Seoul, Korea, Archbishop Dr. Leonardo Ulrich Steiner, Archbishop of Manaus, Brazil. In the discussion moderated by Fr. Dr. Markus Lubert, the local differences of the respective contexts became concrete and transparent. With regard to the different ways of dealing with the pandemic, it became clear that the concrete charitable witness is of great importance in pastoral contexts. Archbishop Steiner emphasised that the Catholic Church offers its help to all, regardless of political considerations. Further topics were the appeal of Pentecostal churches, inter-religious challenges in Asia or Africa, ecumenical relations with Pentecostal churches, and finally also aspects that the panelists brought up with regard to their local churches as possibly in need of change, such as spiritual guidance for social and political engagement instead of concentrating solely on charismatic-liturgical activities.

The panel demonstrated with impressive clarity, especially with regard to less prominent contexts such as Malaysia or South Korea, how context-dependent the Pentecostal movement develops on the one hand and how adaptable and innovative it is on the other. It also became clear that a deeper analysis of the developments is needed, insofar as pastoral care also includes understanding which religious-spiritual needs with regard to public Christian engagement are met by the Pentecostal movement, instead of only focusing on how a further exodus can be stopped. With the intention of deepening such issues, a follow-up workshop is being planned, in which the results of this research project will be further discussed with church actors working in the field of pastoral ministry.

List of speakers

Prof. Dr. Amos Yong

Professor of Theology and Mission, Dean of the School of Mission and Theology and Senior Academic Director at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He is also a trained pastor of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

Prof. Dr. Andreas Heuser

Theologian and political scientist. Since 2012 Professor of Non-European Christianity at the University of Basel; since 2020: Dean of the Faculty of Theology; since 2019: President of the German Society for Missiology (DGMW).

Prof. Dr. Brenda Carra

PhD in Social Sciences from the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP/Brazil); Professor at the Department of Social Anthropology at the same university and coordinator of the Laboratory of Religious Anthropology (LAR/UNICAMP).

Charles Bertille

Secretary General of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei (CBCMSB) and Secretary General of Caritas Malaysia. He holds a Master's degree in Development Management and a Master of Arts in Systematic Theology.

Sr. Dr. Cecilia Chung-myung Son

Belongs to the Sisters of the Good Shepherd of Jesus and has been a pastoral associate at the Catholic International Parish of Seoul, Korea since 2014. She holds a PhD in theology with a focus on ecumenism. She is also a member of the Commission for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea.

Prof. Dr. Ebenezer Obadare

Sociologist. Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas and Fellow at the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa.

Prof. Dr. Giovanni Maltese

Junior Professor of Religious Studies and Global Christianity at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Hamburg and Managing Director of the Institute for Missiology, Ecumenism and Religious Studies.

Prof. Dr. Gunda Werner

Catholic theologian and, since 2018, Professor of Dogmatics at the Faculty of Catholic Theology at Karl Franzens University in Graz, where she has been Head of the Institute for Systematic Theology and Liturgical Studies since 2019.

Prof. Dr. Jayeel S. Cornelio

Sociologist. He is Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Development Studies Programme at the Ateneo de Manila University.

Prof. Dr. José Luis Pérez Guadalupe

Holds a PhD in Sociology, a Canonical Licentiate in Theology, a Masters in Anthropology and one in Criminology. He is currently a research professor at the Graduate School of the Universidad del Pacífico. He is also Vice-President of the Institute for Christian Social Studies (IESC) and advisor to the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS).

Rev. Fr. Dr. Lawrence Nchekwube Nwankwo

A doctor of theology and a Catholic priest in the Diocese of Ekwulobia, Nigeria. He is currently the Diocesan Chancellor/Secretary of his Diocese and a lecturer at the Faculty of Religion and Human Relations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Archbishop Dr. Leonardo Ulrich Steiner, OFM

Archbishop of Manaus, Brazil. He holds a master's degree and a doctorate in philosophy. Among other offices, Dom Leonardo was Secretary General of the National Episcopal Conference of Brazil for two terms, from 2011 to 2019.

Prof. Dr. Ruth Marshall

She is an associate professor of political science and religious studies at the University of Toronto.