

## THE POLITICAL LIFE OF THINGS. EXPLORATIONS ON MATERIAL CULTURE AND CONSUMPTION IN EVANGELICAL GROUPS IN BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

### Abstract

The aim of the article is to explore the material culture of Neo-Pentecostals' mega-churches in Buenos Aires City, Argentina. In order to do this, we will re-construct three consumers' profile and the way that political senses are put into play. Profiles will be analyzed according to (a) the ritual context that eases consumption through specific institutions; (b) the chosen objects and (c) the political meanings that is inferred from the uses and understandings of them. This article is divided into three parts. In the first one, we are going to briefly develop the methodological framework and introduce the concepts of megachurch and material culture. In the second one, we will empirically study three religious consumption itineraries that describe different modalities of participation in the internal life of temples. Lastly, we are going to explore the political senses related to cultural commodities of large Evangelical organizations.

**Keywords:** material culture, mega-churches, Evangelicals, leadership, Argentina

### Introduction

For the purpose of a sociological comprehension of economic-religious practices, we can understand the consumption of spiritual objects as a specific form of social relationship<sup>2</sup>. Through the acts of buying and selling religious products -such as books, music, films or clothing- believers attain links of proximity, negotiation or distance, facing a territory of beliefs and their singular definition of reality. The system of dispositions and preferences that constitute the taste<sup>3</sup> for these special commodities expresses the different ways of inhabiting the material culture of one or various groups to which they have a sense of belonging. Or to say it in terms of Arjun Appadurai: the social life of things allows us to explore the logic of adherence that regulates the interaction individual-group<sup>4</sup>.

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1 Email: jalgranti@hotmail.com

2 Miller Daniel, *Ir de compras: una teoría*. Siglo XXI, México-Madrid, 1999, pp. 15-31; Heilbrunn Benoît, *La consommation et ses sociologies*. Armand Colin, Paris, 2014, pp. 19-42.

3 Bourdieu Pierre, *La distinción*. Taurus, Madrid, 2006, pp. 169-174.

4 Appadurai Arjun, *La vida social de las cosas*, Grijalbo, México D.F. 1991, pp.29-32.

It is here where the readings and political motivations about the place of church in society are shaped.

In the contemporary studies of religion the generic problem of consumption is usually themed -almost without exceptions- through a specific and unique formula of social relationship. It is described with the metaphorical image of a “*religiousness à la Carte*” of “*believer menu*” or “*the bricolage -DIY-*” as highly individualized forms of believing in which the subjective agency takes precedence over institutional structures. The focus in these analyses prioritizes the capability of combining, mixing and producing eclectic, hybrid appropriations between different cultural commodities. An image of the present religious landscape is built governed by the withdrawal of classic institutions and the emphasizing of an individual that self- validates their beliefs through consumption<sup>5</sup>. Hence, it is important to relativize the reach of these diagnoses about deinstitutionalization of believing because Neo-Pentecostalism<sup>6</sup> operates in alternative, even opposite directions.

Indeed, it is possible to recognize that the Evangelical cultural industry actively contributes to the re-institutionalization of churches and other agents (production companies, publishing houses, distributors, shops, etc.). In broad terms, the temples of different sizes and demography select and sometimes produce, a certain “family of objects” being this a particular style in music, books, films, documentaries and authors that define the identity of the organization. In this plane, the highly professionalized cultural production of the megachurches that we are going to analyze in this article, stands out<sup>7</sup>. The dominant mode of Evangelical consumption is determined to aesthetically ensure believers’ loyalty; that is to say, it seeks to produce a strong identification with a space of action, a defined group and a way of perceiving reality. Besides, in these contexts, cultural objects bear powerful political senses on leadership along with the participation of Christians in the transformation of structures of power.

Following this analysis, the purpose of this article is to explore the system of objects that form the material culture of the large Neo-Pentecostal churches in Buenos Aires City. Our aim is to reconstruct the consumers’ profile that believers define, and the way that political senses that challenge the established ways of

5 Hervieu-Léger Danièle, *El peregrino y el convertido*, Editorial Instituto Cultural Helénico, México D.F, 2004, pp. 189.

6 Evangelical growth in Latin America and Argentina does not comprise every Protestant denomination as a whole but mainly the Neo-Pentecostal sectors, which represent a change in the perspective and forms of liturgy in historical Pentecostalism. In general, change has to do primarily with a turn towards the “secular world”, i.e., a religious attitude that seeks involvement in the society and culture of its time, adopting contemporary language and means of communication. For that reason, Neo-Pentecostalism incorporates all kinds of musical styles; uses print media, television, and radio; tries to answer day-to-day problems related to physical and mental health, economic prosperity, love, personal growth and leadership, among other areas. Religious answers are based above all on the charismatic authority of the preacher and on the integration of the members in participation networks within the church. This has contributed to the emergence of the megachurches in the last twenty years. To deepen on this topic see Freston Paul, Neo-pentecostalism in Brazil: problems of definition and the struggle for hegemony, *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, Année 44, Paris, 1999, pp. 145-161.

7 James Jonathan, *A moving faith. Mega churches go south*, Sage, New Delhi, 2015, pp. 7-10.

religion in Argentina are put into play. Profiles will be analyzed according to (a) the ritual context that eases consumption through specific institutions; (b) the chosen objects (c) the political content that is inferred from the uses and understandings of Evangelical material culture.

The article is divided into three parts. In the first one, we are going to briefly develop the methodological framework and introduce two main concepts for our research: the categories of megachurch and material culture. In the second one, we will empirically analyze three religious consumption itineraries that describe different modalities of participation in the internal life of temples. Lastly, and in dialogue with the politology of religion's main topics<sup>8</sup>, we will explore, through the point of view of leaders, the political senses that are addressed to evangelical's commodities.

### **Theoretical-methodological precisions: on megachurches and material culture**

Before making further progress in the consumption itineraries, it is necessary to make some methodological observations and to explain the concepts of megachurch and material culture applied to our field of study.

In the first place, it is important to point out that this article presents the initial results of a Multiyear Investigation Project<sup>9</sup> aimed to the study of the circulation processes and therapeutic use of Evangelical material culture in the Metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. This project is financed by the National Scientific and Technical Investigations Council (CONICET) and involves the participation of Dr. Mariela Mosqueira.

In the second place, and concerning the methodological framework, we applied a characteristic qualitative sociological approach, incorporating widespread ethnographic techniques; it is the case of open, extended and recurring interviews; participant observation and documents analysis. To build the consumption itineraries, we selected different narratives framed by a corpus of interviews circumscribed to large Neo-Pentecostal churches. They describe the variety but also the regularities in the complex ways of linkage with the material culture of the temple. The chosen trajectories do not intend to produce a total representation of the universe of study in the fashion of statistical sample, but to inductively establish religious objects users profiles. Therefore, the generalization method is analytical and not statistical. Its strength is not based in the number of itineraries included in this investigation but in the possibilities that these same itineraries give.

The ethnographic case supposes the selection of an object of study according to its interest and relevance, allowing its understanding in terms of its singu-

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8 Mirojjub Jevtic, Political science and Religion, *Journal of Politics and Religion* Vol 1, N° 1, Belgrade, 2007, pp. 59-69.

9 The title of the research project (PIP 2015-2017) is "Social Forms of Religious Consumption".

larity<sup>10</sup>. In this sense, the case study that will allow us to build Evangelical itineraries of consumption corresponds to the institutional phenomenon known in the academic world as megachurches<sup>11</sup>. It is essential to briefly define the dimension and range that this category comprises.

### *The rise of large religious organizations*

We can identify an important growth in large Evangelical churches in the most important urban centers of Argentina during the last 30 years. This phenomenon occurs in a context of consolidation of Neo-Pentecostalism as the first religious minority<sup>12</sup> in our country. The chosen organizations in this study were founded during the 80s, but it is not until the beginning of the 90s, in the height of the expansion of the "Gospel", that the pastors adapt their institutional program to a megachurch model<sup>13</sup>. Following a repeated tendency in many Latin American countries they share an evangelizing orientation aimed to middle and middle high classes in Buenos Aires. Therefore, the proposals that these institutions offer to society have the intention of reproducing the imaginary of social mobility and its consumption standards.

In more analytical terms we can state that megachurches are characterized by four dominant features (1) the first one is the scale of parishioners that reach around 25.000 to 30.000 members. The magnitude of the congregation produces not only a quantitative but also a qualitative change in ecclesiastic organizations. This growth drives them to develop new management devices of social relationships in order to collectively integrate individuals. (2) This takes us to the second morphological feature. The institutional proposal consists in the organization of the community in small groups of "cells"<sup>14</sup> which are in charge of

10 Stake Robert, *Case Studies*, In: *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Denzin N.K y Lincoln, YS. (eds.) Sage Publications, California, 1994; Neiman Guillermo & Quaranta Germán. Los estudios de caso en la investigación sociológica, In: *Estrategias de investigación cualitativa*, Vasilachis de Gialdino Irene (coord.), Gedisa, Barcelona, 2006, pp. 213-237.

11 Gramby-Sobukwe Sharon & Hoiland Tim. The Rise of Mega-Church Efforts in International Development: A Brief Analysis, *Transformation* Vol. 26, N° 2, 2009, pp. 104-117; Thumma Scott & Dave Travis, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches*, Jossey-Bass publisher, 2007; García-Ruiz Jesús & Michel Patrick, *Et Dieu sous-traite la salut au marché. De l'action des mouvements évangélique en Amérique Latine*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2012; Algranti Joaquin, Megachurches and the problem of leadership: An analysis of the encounter between the Evangelical world and Politics in Argentina. *Religion, State and Society*, N°: 40, United Kingdom 2012, pp 49-68.

12 According to the latest national survey conducted in 2008 by CONICET's department of 'Society, Culture and Religion' (National Scientific and Technical Research Council), Evangelicals today represent nine per cent (9%) of the population, in a cultural context in which Catholics predominate (76.5%) and a significant number (11.3%) of people are indifferent to religion. Evangelicals are thus the largest religious minority in the country. For more details see Mallimaci Fortunato, Esquivel Juan & Giménez-Beliveau, Verónica, What do Argentine people believe in? Religion and social structure in Argentina. *Social Compass*, N°:62, Louvain, 2015, pp. 255-277.

13 This research is circumscribed to the temple Faith Cathedral (*Catedral de la fe*) of pastor Osvaldo Carnival and to King of Kings (*Rey de Reyes*) of pastor Claudio Freidzon. They are two of the four most important megachurches of Buenos Aires City, together with Presence of God (*Presencia de Dios*) of Bernardo Stamateas and the New Life Christian Center (*Centro Cristiano Nueva Vida*) of Guillermo Prein.

14 The cell system is a model for growth and integration that arranges the members in a network of differentiated groups which

guides or leaders that conduct the internal life of the temple. Intensive sociability, exchange, leisure and consumption spaces are constructed there allowing the everyday functioning of the group. The pedagogical and social functions of the Evangelical proposal are reproduced in these microenvironments. (3) The third dominant feature is related to an interpellation that mainly summons the different positions of internal leadership of the megachurch to project themselves towards structures of power and decision in society (like the State, the media, universities, the corporate sector, etc.). There is an active production of discourses that constantly theme the need of social change and the main role that Christians have in the transformation of the environment. (4) In relation to this aspect we would like to underline a fourth and last feature related to the role of material culture, meaning the integrated group of religious commodities that contribute to the circulation of symbols, images, discourses, melodies and messages. The large temples invigorate the Evangelical industrial culture through a system of objects that adjust to the selections and productions of each pastor. For the purpose of this article, it is necessary to briefly deepen the concept of material culture.

#### *Cultural production and its dimensions of analysis*

Applied to the study of megachurches this concept refers to the material manifestations that express ways of life, rites and principles of organization of beliefs in large temples. From there, emerges a particular style of thought, as well as a defined way of classification and description of the world in correspondence to its social milieu.

At the same time the classifications that “the things” carry suppose inequalities, internal hierarchies and legitimation strategies or questionings of the established criteria of authority. That is the reason why material culture can be understood as a fighting arena for the legitimate definitions that rule the functioning of institutions and their singular understanding of sacredness<sup>15</sup>.

The megachurches develop their own logic of cultural production that distinguishes and segments the different moments of the cult. Therefore, there is a corpus of highly singularized commodities tailored to the institutional proposal and to the leadership style of its referents. DVDs with pastors’ sermons, talks, rites and mass events around the world, CDs with praise and worshipping music by the professional church choir, pedagogical manuals for guides and believers

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act in a joint way. Each cell of eight to twelve people has a leader and a deputy leader called a ‘Timoteo’, named after St Paul’s disciple and representing young leadership in the church. They both guide the group life through meetings, personal interviews and prayer meetings. To become a leader it is necessary to go through a training process offered by the church, and to obtain a group of believers to shepherd.

15 Miller Daniel, Consumo como cultura material. *Horizontes Antropológicos*, año. 13, núm. 28, Porto Alegre, 2007, pp. 33-63; Algranti Joaquin, Modelos de orden, modelos de juego. Notas para una sociología del gusto religioso, *Estudos da Religião*, vol. 30 núm. 3, San Pablo, 2016, pp.145-164.

training, the best-sellers of the pastor, his wife and collaborators, a variety of stationary products with the temple's logo etc. A whole miniature cultural industry standardized in its format but completely personalized in its contents. According to the conceptual proposal of Anthony Giddens it contributes to multiply the possibilities of disembedding<sup>16</sup> and re-appropriation of the cultural commodities of Neo-Pentecostalism.

It is important to recognize the existence of a recent line of investigation that addresses material culture in three different dimensions among the social sciences of religion in Latin America. The first one refers to the industry, that is the semi-structured complex of agents that participate in some segment of the productive chain, either the manufacturing, the distribution or the dissemination and selling of the spiritually marked objects<sup>17</sup>. The second dimension, relates to the ritual contexts (festivities, ceremonies, cults, sacraments, proselytizing campaigns, concerts, cinema premieres, fairs, mass meditations, conferences or solidarity events) as a situation of consumption and circulation of commodities that revitalize Latin American religiosities<sup>18</sup>. Finally, the third dimension of analysis, in which our article is included, consists in the study of the processes of reception and appropriation of cultural objects. These processes are understood in a broad sense, taking into account the various strategies of inhabiting a territory of beliefs<sup>19</sup>.

16 Giddens Anthony, *The consequences of Modernity*, Estados Unidos, Stanford University Press 1990, pp. 21-29.

17 Frigerio Alejandro, La construcción de problemas sociales: cultura, política y medios de comunicación. *Comunicação e Política*. Vol. 4, Nº 2, 1997, Rio de Janeiro, pp. 137-149; Lewgoy Bernardo, O livro religioso no Brasil recente: uma reflexão sobre as estratégias editoriais de espíritas e evangélicos. *Ciencias Sociales y Religión*, Año 6, Nº 6, Porto Alegre, 2004, pp. 51-69; Carbonelli Marcos & Moaqueira Mariela, Luis Palau en Argentina: Construcción mediática del cuerpo evangélico, disputa por el espacio público y nuevas formas de territorialidad. *Enfoques*, Vol. XX, San Martín, 2008, pp. 153-175; Leite Peixoto, María Cristina. Santos al alcance de la mano: los caminos de la santidad contemporánea católica. In: *Religiones y culturas*, Steil Carlos, Martin Eloisa Camur a Marcelo (Coord.) Biblos, Buenos Aires, 2009, pp.155-187; Semán Pablo & Battaglia Agustina. De la industria cultural a la religión. Nuevas formas y caminos para el sacerdocio. *Civitas*, San Pablo, vol. 12, núm. 3, 2012, pp. 439-452; Algranti Joaquín, *La industria del creer. Sociología de las mercancías religiosas*. Biblos, Buenos Aires, 2013; Semán Pablo, Industrias culturales y religión en las institucionalizaciones emergentes del creer, In: *Circuitos religiosos: pluralidade e interculturalidade* Oro Ari Pedro & Tadvald, Marcelo (Org.), Cirkula, Porto Alegre, 2014, pp. 279-308.

18 Garma Navarro, Carlos. Del himnario a la industria de la alabanza. Un estudio sobre la transformación de la música religiosa. *Ciencias Sociales y Religión*. Año 2, Nº 2, Porto Alegre, 2000, pp. 63-85; Menezes Renata de Castro. *A dinâmica do sagrado: rituais, sociabilidade e santidade num convento do Rio de Janeiro*: Relume-Dumará, Rio de Janeiro, 2004; Jungblut Airton, O uso religioso da Internet no Brasil. *PLURA*, vol. 1, núm. 1, San Pablo, 2010, pp. 202-212; Ameigeiras Aldo, *Religiosidad popular*, Universidad Nacional General Sarmiento-Biblioteca Nacional, Buenos Aires, 2008; Martín Eloisa, Gilda, el ángel de la cumbia. Prácticas de sacralización de una cantante argentina. *Religião e Sociedade*, Vol. 27, Nº2, Rio de Janeiro, 2007, pp. 30-54; Fidanza Juan & López Galera, María Cecilia, Regulaciones a una devoción estigmatizada: culto a San la Muerte en Buenos Aires. *Debates Do NER*, Año 15, Nº 25, Porto Alegre, 2014, pp. 171-196; Pascuchelli Natalia. *Avatares Metaleros. Procesos de resignificación del "ser metalero" en jóvenes asociados al universo evangélico del Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires*. [Tesis de Maestría] Universidad Nacional del Arte, Buenos Aires, 2014; Lago Luciana, Jóvenes, música y pentecostalismo en Comodoro Rivadavia. Dossier *Primer Encuentro Patagónico de Teoría Política*, 2013 pp.69-74.

19 Menezes Renata de Castro, *A dinâmica do sagrado: rituais, sociabilidade e santidade num convento do Rio de Janeiro*: Relume-Dumará, Rio de Janeiro, 2004; De la Torre Renée, *Religiosidades Nómadas*, Publicaciones de la Casa Chata, México D.F, 2012; Semán Pablo, *Bajo continuo. Exploraciones descentradas sobre cultura popular y masiva*. Gorla, Buenos Aires, 2006; Semán Pablo & Rizo Valeria, Tramando religión y best sellers. La literatura masiva y la transformación de las prácticas religiosas. *Alteridades*, Vol. 23, Nº 45, Iztapalapa, 2013 pp. 79-92; Velho Octavio, O cativoiro da besta-fera. *Religião & Sociedade*, Año 14, Nº 1, Rio de Janeiro, 1987,

The study of consumption clearly sets out the ways of employment of the objects that participate in spiritual life. The uses of “the things” evidence one of the probably most creative aspects of material culture and its multiple ways of living it. Our article belongs to this last dimension of study. Hereunder, we will reconstruct the itineraries of consumption of three profiles of believers that actively participate of the Evangelical megachurches. Each one of them, presents different degrees of commitment in the division of spiritual tasks of the temple. The itineraries will be reconstructed from the ritual contexts in which these individuals perform, their objects of preference and the political contents that take part in the understanding of the role of church in society.

### **Three ways of understanding religious consumption**

The political dimension of evangelical commodities is expressed -in more consistent manner- in the religious trajectories that are identified in some degree with the institutional proposal of the megachurches. This means that believers who achieve a semi-professionalism in the matters of the temple tend to incorporate a political view upon their consumption sense. This is the reason why the chosen profiles in this article do not correspond to the majority or to most of the participants of the congregation, meaning the average believer who is regularly present in the cults, but to those profiles that are trained and that hold leadership positions within the megachurches. Only 10% of the members of the community first assists to the School of Life (*Escuela de Vida*), then the School of Leaders (*Escuela de líderes*) and finally carries out a responsibility as “cell guides”. It is in this relatively small but significant fraction -in a community of 27,000 members there are around 2,700 cases- where we are going to draw up three itineraries of consumption of religious commodities. The figure of group leaders, commodities producers and militants will allow us to analyze the political life of objects.

#### *Books, experience and leadership*

Let us start with the career of a young cell leader. His choices and preferences in relation to Evangelical merchandise are an example of the role that material culture plays in two key aspects of his biography: the creation of a religious experience and the projection towards the leadership styles that are offered by mega-churches.

Nicolas is 23 years old and was born in a popular neighborhood in Buenos Aires Province in a second- generation Christian family. His grandfather was the first one in converting and, afterwards, his father even achieved to become a

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pp. 4-27; Mosqueira Mariela, *Santa rebeldía: construcciones de juventud en comunidades pentecostales del Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires*. Universidad de Buenos Aires. Tesis de doctorado, Buenos Aires, 2014.

semi professional of religious life in a small church, Christ is the solution (*Cristo es la solución*), where he carried out the position of pastor until 2008. However, his father's professional activity could never be that of a pastor, he worked independently in a transportation company and afterwards in used car sales. His mother is a housewife; she knew Pentecostalism through her husband and was in charge of Sunday school. Our interviewee comes from a family with four siblings.

The youngest, a teenager, is *"away from Gospel"* in contrast, the eldest one is going through a phase of full commitment with Christian life and his middle sister is satisfied with regular assistance to church. He has been living with his sister and her recent husband in Capital Federal for some years now. He works fulltime as a programmer in a company while he studies System Engineering in a public university. One of his goals is to become the first university graduate in his family.

Since he was a boy and until he was 16 years old, he was socialized in an Evangelical environment, surrounded by preaching material, books, music and anecdotes about miracles and healings. During this period he still didn't identify himself as a *"real Christian"* because *"I went to church because my folks went, because they told me to go"* and at public school, far from differentiating, he mimicked the life style of his friends. The inherited spiritual ways were not the ways lived and this was exposed in his preferences and consumptions. Following a relatively widespread model among second and third-generation Christians, these differences were also revealed in the internal disposition to re-accept his parents' beliefs, though in other terms, and in alternative institutional environments.

In correspondence with other analogue narratives, his curiosity about spiritual matters became more intense in a transition phase between two biographical cycles: the ending of secondary school and the initial contacts with adult world, recreated in university and in his first job at McDonald's. In that time, the family decides to move temples due to some differences with the pastor because of *"lack of results"*. Thus, notwithstanding the remoteness, his father makes the decision to congregate in the megachurch King of Kings (*Rey de Reyes*). He knew the pastor because of his notoriety in the Christian milieu and due to his television show. The change of church also supposes a change in sociabilities and the interpellation of knowing God as a genuinely personal experience. To have an experience, a direct contact that reveals itself in a physical level and in a transformation of the character. This command of personalization of belief is not easy to achieve: *"Many people said, Yes, God exists! And what happens to me? I'm standing here, feeling nothing"*. The first book he bought, following the recommendation of his cell leader, is the one by Benni Hinn, *"Good Morning Holy Spirit"*.

There probably isn't a most popular book for the offspring of the spiritual revival of the 90s and the generation that followed, that *"Good Morning Holy Spirit"*. The possibilities of a religious experience find there a grammar or a flex-

ible corpus of rules that render Neo-Pentecostalism a different identity. It is an apparently simple proposal: “*The Holy Spirit, states Hinn’s testimony, is a person similar to you. He can feel, perceive and answer. He suffers. He has the ability of loving and the ability of hating. He speaks and has his own will*”<sup>20</sup>. The experience of the sacred and the feeling that goes with this, depends on experiencing the personality of the Holy Spirit as a material being, close to one, as a friend.

It is a complex experience that requires not only the participation in church life but also the socialization of cultural commodities that surround it. For example, after Benni Hinn, Nicolas bought other initial books by Pastor Freidzon “*Treasures in jars of Clay*” (*Tesoros en vasos de barro*) he replaces Daddy Yankee’s reggaeton by Latin American Christian bands in his MP3 -Rescate, Kiosko, Redimi2 and Marcos Witt- he intensifies his moments of personal prayer through the songs of Hillsong<sup>21</sup> he consults in *You Tube* the sermons of Cash Luna or the talks of Kathryn Kuhlman, he follows pastor Bernardo Stamateas in Twitter and has reverend Carnival among his Facebook friends.

The local and foreign cultural commodities go hand in hand in his learning process of a personal experience and as a way of transmitting it to others. The texts of Sergio Scataglioni (“*Fire to his holiness*”) and Reinhard Bonnke (“*Evangelism by Fire*”, “*Time is running out*”) as well as the bestsellers by Myles Munroe (“*Releasing your Potential*”, “*The Spirit of Leadership*”) became his authority references in the subjects of evangelizing and in his education as a group leader.

His rise within the megachurch is related to his need of training, study and to hold influential positions in society. At the beginning, he showed interest and he wished to professionalize in religious matters dropping his university studies, and dedicating fulltime to evangelization. Nevertheless, thanks to the advice given by his pastors and the readings of Munroe he decided to reformulate his life project towards getting higher education and for the transmission of Christian values through professional performance in secular spaces of leadership.

“*Studying in the university is part of the calling. Even more, once, I went to see a pastor here in the church to ask him this [if I should or shouldn’t drop my studies] ...and he told me: listen Nico, the more tools you have, the better! Because I believe in a God of excellence, a quality God. And I believe that the world sometimes sees Christians as lazy people, as if they didn’t study, as if they did nothing, and I want to change this image and I want to be a person of influence and this is why I want to study, I want to be educated and to get to places where many people can’t get. This is my vision or the vision that God gave me, my goal*”.

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20 Hinn Benni, *Buenos días, Espíritu Santo*, Caribe, Nashville, 2011, pp. 42.

21 Hillsong is a Christian music band of praise and worshipping and the record label belongs to a Pentecostal megachurch located in Australia. Its songs have been translated and adapted in the entire world including Argentina. Currently they have their own branch in Buenos Aires City. That is why, Hillsong not only represents a musical model for the local pastors, but also a rival temple that disputes and competes with other churches in the participation of young Christians. For a better development of the commercial aspect of this phenomenon see Yip Jeaney, *Marketing the sacred. The case of Hillsong Church, Australia*, In: *A moving faith*, James (Edit.), Sage, New Delhi, 2015 pp. 106-127.

Numerous leaders of the church with similar consumption itineraries share the “vision” that Nicolas expresses.

The political dimension of Evangelical material culture is based on the discursive construction of a calling to believers for a university-professional education, and to their projection to every structure of power in society. The strategy that adopts this goal is the striving for excellence in professional activities. To be a leader in the church implies to reach -at least as a project or intention- secular leadership positions in every possible field: cultural, economic, political, state, etc.

We can recognize in his trajectory the three dimensions of the consumption itineraries that we pointed out before. (a) The ritual contexts of the objects that Nicolas chooses are circumscribed to the institutional project of the mega-church and her strong interpellations “to really know God”, “Spread the Word”, “rise as a leader”. These commands related to secondary socialization in Neo-Pentecostalism circulate around the places he daily attends. The material culture spread by the institution offers-through the temple, the bookstore, and the shops- symbolic resources to incorporate these senses to practical life; (b) the dominant products are books, life stories, because they are who best describe, under the discursive genre of testimonies, the problems that Christians face during evangelization and leadership tasks. Music also has a key place as it “softens the heart”, sensitizes and makes the moments of prayer more dynamic. The variety of his preferences is completed with radio Gospel, social media, You Tube and the shows of TV Channel Enlace (c) Lastly we can find the political contents of cultural commodities-literature, music, sermons and radio shows- that theme the importance of Christian leadership. The objects chosen by Nicolas carry the senses that reinforce the idea of a “Gospel” strongly devoted to the world, upon society, defying the strict models of secularization that make religion a private matter.

#### *Cultural producers: Christian readings on social reality*

The first trajectory offered us a consumer profile related to the leadership of new generations. Next, the case of Roberto will allow us to understand the way in which cultural contents are combined and created from churches, and how an Evangelical view on social reality is built.

Our interviewee defines himself as a *sui-generis* Evangelic, meaning that his way of inhabiting the territory of Neo-Pentecostalism beliefs is the result of a personal itinerary that we can qualify as atypical. Roberto is 58 years old; he is married to his wife Betty and has two children who live with them in Villa Bal-lester, a neighborhood in the Buenos Aires Province. He has a broad and eclectic education: he went to primary and secondary Catholic schools, he attended for three years the seminary to become a priest -but quitted due to a bad experience

with one of his counselors- and graduated from studies in Catholic theology and in social psychology. He has been working for more than 25 years as a journalist, working for secular and religious media, he has written research books on significant topics for the Christian milieu ("The dangers of mental control" and "Resisting the devil, knowing the enemy") he held management positions in press and media areas for the Evangelical festivals of the Luis Palau Association in different parts of the world and in the media department of several megachurches, some of them historical ones as Vision of Future (*Visión de futuro*) and some recent ones as Faith Cathedral (*Catedral de la fe*) and King of Kings (*Rey de Reyes*). At the present time (2016) he is an anchorman in a news morning show in a Christian radio. We are talking about a man professionalized in the Evangelical communication media.

His consumption itinerary of material culture is inseparable from his own religious itinerary. The merchandises with which he feels identified depend on his educational spaces. The first one of them is the Catholic seminary and the universe of readings –books, encyclicals, manuals, leaflets-that compose his education program in different areas of knowledge from canonical law, history of the church and theology to the actual action of pastoral work. After three years, his time in the seminary ends with a "deception with faith" that he explains in two senses. In the one hand, his "disappointment with the men of the church" and, on the other hand, the differences he had with Christology –excessively historical-that was taught to him. Both reasons made him move away from ecclesiastic pedagogy and to seek new ways of spirituality.

Therefore, he began to participate in one of the first manifestations of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR) at the beginning of the 80s. He is interested in moving away from "humans dogmas" and to know God in an experiential way, to have a close, personal relationship. The physical and emotional dimension of faith coexists with the intellectual basis that is given to him by the readings of reference authors, as the material by Father Dario Betancourt ("The healthy man" and "I come to heal"). The Charismatic movement becomes a bridge towards the practice and the theory of Evangelical spirituality that were in expansion in those same years. His approach and conversion happens through an Evangelistic street campaign that leads him, some time later, to systematically attend the church Vision of Future (*Visión de Futuro*) of Reverend Omar Cabrera.

This is one of the pioneer temples in the spreading of Neo-Pentecostalism in Argentina. One of its distinctive features is Reverend Cabrera's traditional clergyman clothing which resembled him, to the eyes of the local milieu, with the figure of a priest. His clothing also responded to a specific vocation for those people who were distanced from Catholicism ("the Reverend always said that he had a special love for the lost sheep of Catholicism, because they also lose sheep in Catholicism. And as many times they don't go out to look for them ... he went out to look for these lost sheep, that was the message"). Other distinctive feature is the

production and spread of a dynamic material culture composed of books, music, films and, above all, for an active use of the available communication media. His religious consumption itinerary finds here a new turning point.

Roberto combines his job as journalist, speaker and writer in the secular circuits, with training and an internal career in the church. First, he is named local preacher, then minister and finally he specializes in general coordination of radio and television in Vision of Future (*Vision de futuro*). This supposes not only a new education in the doctrine, theology and protestant liturgy, but also a knowledge and an practical command of the specific materials of the temple: Omar Cabrera's books, activities, campaigns, events and festivals, music styles and audio visual productions

His universe of religious and professional consumption is circumscribed to the system of objects of the church and its international referents. This phase allows him to stand out in his job, to build a name in the Christian setting, in fact, in 1999 the same year that he left Cabrera's church due to the death of the pastor's wife, Roberto publishes his most renowned book "The dangers of mental control" (*Los peligros del control mental*) by a Catholic publishing house.

His condition of consumer and producer of cultural commodities allows him to move around the Evangelical circuits that produce religious contents in different formats. His expertise is limited to radio, television, press and the creation of large proportions events (as the campaigns of the megachurches or the mass gatherings of Luis Palau where he actively worked). As a journalist and researcher, Roberto uses his books and his radio show to spread an Evangelical point of view on some strictly spiritual topics such as the law of freedom of religion, the criticism to occultism, witchcraft, the New era or the violent forms of proselytism. The daily news and the social problems related, for example, to the decriminalization of abortion, drug legalization, marriage equality<sup>22</sup>, poverty, and the implications of Christians with politics are also themed. *"There is a relation with politics that is inevitably given as long as our claim as church is aimed to the cultural and social worlds. And in both aspects the powers that be intervene... so it is inevitable to get into the polis"*. Nevertheless, in his view, to get into the polis implies avoiding any intention to lead the vote of the churchgoers to any particular candidate; *"it is always recommended never to tell people what they have to vote or nothing of the sort from the pulpit. Never, ever, ever."*

Political projection depends, in any case, of the individual vocation of believers that are encouraged, from the material culture and the available communication media, to occupy a major role in the public scene.

The chosen dimensions of study reappear in his itinerary. (a) To begin with, the material culture that governs his choices of consumption is inscribed in ritual contexts and in particular groups: the studies in the seminary, the celebrations

22 Argentina was the first country in Latin America to legally recognize same-sex marriage in 2010. The so-called Equal Marriage Law was criticized and resisted by a minority but highly mobilized sector of the catholic and evangelical world.

of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Vision of Future church and his job environments (Faith Cathedral, King of Kings and Luis Palau Association). Each one of these spaces defines a horizon of cultural contents that, in the case of the Evangelical circuit, becomes an expert competence in the production of books, radio, television and press. (b) The dominant objects that rule his relation with religious commodities are, in the one hand, the Catholic and Evangelical literature that is linked to theological education in both traditions and, on the other hand, the promotional materials as well as audiovisual productions of the temples where he works and gathers. (c) Lastly the political dimension that carries this consumption, but also the production of cultural commodities in which he participates, is inseparable from the task of promoting an Evangelical point of view on spiritual and social matters on a large scale. The importance of his professional activity as a journalist lays in the everyday construction of a framework from where the daily news are tackled, aiming to produce an Evangelical reading on social reality. It concerns mainly an intellectual job that he complements and reinforces with the discursive construction of a calling to a Christian leadership of society.

*"A place to talk that is my own" militancy and new political structures*

The pastors' children, that is to say, the second-generation of leaders, occupy an ambiguous place, full of opportunities but also of responsibilities and duties. On the one hand, they have the privileged possibility of introducing institutional innovations from the sphere of influence and authority of the temple. On the other hand, they carry the burden of religious obligations and the system of rules related to the administrative machinery of large organizations. Both forces, that of tradition and that of bureaucracy, limit their effective capacity for action. The next itinerary will allow us to analyze the way in which one of these leaders uses Evangelical material culture in the development of strictly political spaces and senses.

At the time of chatting about his likes and preferences regarding religious cultural goods, the answers that Pablo give are a little vague, ambiguous, and too general. What happens is that he was born in a completely Christian household and at his home *"I was overwhelmed or covered by Evangelical material"* meaning books, music, radio shows and movies that surrounded his everyday life. Pablo is 30 years old and is one of the three children of a highly renowned pastor at a national and international level, due to the fact that he is the founder of Faith Cathedral (*Catedral de la fe*), one of the most popular megachurches in Buenos Aires City, with a congregation of around 30.000 members.

Since he was a child, he was over-socialized in Evangelical material culture till the point of naturalizing this universe of usual references. *"At home, 80% of the books were Christian books. I had everything, so for me, to do something different*

*was to seek something that we didn't have".*

His contact with the secular world and his consumptions developed in other ways. Due to an openness criterion, that repeats in different moments of his biography, his parents sent him to a secular school in order to familiarize him with a reality and an environment different from that of the church. This orientation is also expressed in his professional choice, as he decided to study Political Science in a Catholic university, Universidad del Salvador. He is presently preparing his graduation thesis on the relation between the Evangelical world and politics in Argentina.

His condition of "heir" -meaning the fact that he carries a renowned name in the Christian scene and has access to influence spheres that few people can reach- governs his consumption choices. Even acknowledging their specific value, Pablo does not identify himself with the most popular products of Evangelical culture, for instance, the spirituality books by Benni Hinn ("Good Morning Holy Spirit") or pastor David Yonggi Cho ("The fourth Dimension"), or the leadership publications by Rick Warren ("The Purpose driven Life") or the *bestsellers* by local pastors. The promotional material that could be useful for a recently converted person or a believer interested in educating himself and in learning more, do not interpellate the second-generation leaders as Pablo. He prefers in any case, the reading of the Old and New Testament -"*I am keener in the Bible, pure, direct, the experience*"- literature in general and texts belonging to university education and a combination of Christian and secular music.

The logic that governs his consumption choices is the logic of openness and the possibility of articulating the "Gospel" and its teachings to different domains of society. This means to go for the production of audiovisual contents that are created through Faith Cathedral (*Catedral de la fe*) and its producing company ("*VSN producciones*") renewing its formats and its way of communicating. His aim is to develop highly professional local contents -miniseries, films, and advertisements- that would go beyond the evangelical scene of the megachurch and that could reach large mass media. The same happens to politics.

The religious consumption that our interviewee identifies as the most useful for political praxis, are the re-readings of certain passages of the Bible -Exodus, Proverbs, the Gospel of Luke, among others-. he finds in them "*a manual for leadership...as David, king Saul. How they exercise their kingdom and the problems that constantly come one after the other.... the battle, the struggle, peace, love, children. I think it is a great teaching in a political key*". To think the Old Testament as a political leadership manual, supposes to abstract and renew, in tune with a common practice in large churches, exemplary models of leadership of the main biblical characters. The strategy of political construction that Pablo supports breaks with two types of models or experiences that had been dominating until now in the Evangelical world. The first one is the attempt of direct projection of religious forces and their referents within the electoral system as it hap-

pened with the political party ("*Vision con Valores*") of ex pastor Harold Caballeros in Guatemala. The second experience, is the one of the Universal church of the Kingdom of God ("*Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus*") in Brazil and the way that the pastors council develops a strategy to form an Evangelical caucus in congress, composed by members of different parties. Pablo's point of view is that both models -the one of direct transference or the construction "*from the upper echelons*"- are wrong because they lack territorial anchoring and use the ecclesiastical structure. His proposal is different. Together with a church mate he founded two spaces, the *Leonardo Favio* organization -"*La Favio*"- and the "Good people front" (*Frente Gente de bien*). The aim of both projects is to build an autonomous political structure, independent from the church, but that could eventually be able to articulate with it, offering a space to participate to those members in congregations that have social and citizen interests. We are talking about a space that is built based in three principles that try to redefine the complex relationship between the "Gospel" and politics.

"There are three principles that are very clear for us. The first one is that we do not want to photograph ourselves with pastors because we believe that we need to have a territorial construction from the base. Then we do not need, due to a matter of image, to take our picture with a pastor as others have done in other moment. In second place, we don't want to invade the church. We don't want to disorganize or disarticulate or empty certain ministeries in which people participate. And, in the third place, we don't want to use the platform. Our communication task is not from the platform. The platform is there to preach and for the word to be preached, not for our things. These are three principles that are very clear for us. Who we do call is those in some churches have the vocation, particularly in social and political matters to incorporate to the group, to come to participate as any other."

Pablo exposes a point of view that is lately strengthening among second-generation Evangelical leaders. This proposal aims to promote an involvement of Christians in public matters without political or ecclesiastical structures, meaning the church and the party, mixing and ending up confused. To avoid the use for political ends of the image of the pastor, of his capability for communication and of the platform that represents the megachurch in terms of functioning, prestige and institutional reach. And, in an opposite sense, to prevent that the priorities or religious goals colonize the collective construction of a movement, as well as the demands and strategy that are put into play at the time of disputing government spaces. The idea is to outline a link of articulation among autonomous structures that share the fact of coming from the same Evangelical identity.

At the same time, the group and the front that Pablo leads together with other mates, has a party affinity with the practical principles that historically have

been defended by the Peronism<sup>23</sup>(as the revindication of national and popular subjects, economic independence and sovereignty among other topics). This ideological kinship creates tensions with the dynamic structures of the Justicialist Party and the constant danger of being absorbed by them. Hence, the political production of a particular and own space that is neither Evangelical nor Peronist, but that it is nurtured and works as a bridge between both identities, must struggle with the risk of being assimilated by any of these two strong traditions.

The itinerary of consumption of our interviewee allows us to recognize, with adjustments and nuances, the three dimensions of this article (a) different to other trajectories, the ritual contexts do not occupy here an important place. It is not the cult, the activities, the cell meetings, the campaigns or the massive events that facilitate contact with Evangelical material culture. On the contrary, it forms part of Pablo's primary socialization. He is familiarized to such a degree with literature; music, radio or Christian shows that his interests are aimed to a different direction. (b) The only dominant objects that describe his religious preferences are music and the Bible. The conventional materials that can be attractive to a peripheral believer or even a leader are not part of his tastes. Lastly, (c) the political senses that move Evangelical material culture are expressed by the effort of building a space of their own, and this project is halfway between Christian identity and Peronist identity. The political view that is born not from the pastor, but from his children consists in leading new secular organizations that can articulate with existing churches and the great party cultures of Argentina.

### **Analysis of itineraries**

To begin with, it is necessary to insist in this point again: large Evangelical organizations are complex social actors and, above all, dynamic. The scale and dimensions of its institution depends of a series of functions or key activities among which, for example, the strengthening of the main pastor charisma, the internal labor division, the distribution of the community in small groups, the production of leaderships and the development of a system of consumption goods, stand out. The political senses that move religious objects emerge -maybe in a more explicit manner- when the role that material culture has among church leaders is observed. Let's briefly analyze each one of the itineraries we have mentioned.

In the first case, Nicolas describes an itinerary that develops between a need

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23 Peronism is one of the most important political movements in Argentina. It surges in the '40s around the figure of Juan Domingo Perón and the participation of the so-called labor class and the trade unions. Social justice is one of the main principles that have supported the Justicialist party throughout its history. Expressed in specific government cycles, different ideological currents coexist in it. The last one of them was the Kirchnerism that governed Argentina through its party -"Frente para la Victoria"- from 2003 to 2015.

for a personal experience with the Holy Spirit and his commitment to the leadership proposal offered by the temple. Both searches are inseparable in a peculiar moment of his biography related with the passage to the adult world. As many others, his profile is that of a young leader in the process of socializing in the devotional style and the project of the megachurch, he finds in literature, music, radio and social media a symbolic support to deal with the difficulties of each stage. The political dimension of his cultural consumptions is based in a constant interpellation to the involvement with church matters -a semi-professionalizing in the management and leading of groups- and a calling to education and the professional exercise at spheres of influence in society. The leaders are the main receptors of a discourse on the need of prominence of Christians in the structures of power through professional development. Cultural production identifies in this key segment of large churches, a differentiated religious subject who demands books, songs, films and shows, that theme their eminently political position before the world.

In this sense, the second itinerary represents a different point of view from the one of young leaders. Ricardo's heterodox circulation through different spaces -Catholic seminary, the Charismatic Movement, the first Neo-Pentecostal churches-, puts him in touch with the material culture of each group. His professional management of Catholic and Evangelical contents added to his journalist trade makes him an expert in communication media -in radio, television, press and research books-, recognized in the Christian milieu. He works for prestigious organizations such as Vision of Future (*Vision de Futuro*), Faith Cathedral (*Catedral de la fe*), King of Kings (*Rey de Reyes*), or Luis Palau Association, among others. His professional expertise allows him to work not as a leader or group guide, but as producer of representations, imaginaries and interpretative keys on social reality. The political construction of the church and the believers partly requires a particular interpretation of everyday news that Ricardo contributes to develop and spread through his radio show. As consumer and producer of Evangelical material culture our interviewee allows us to acknowledge the crucial importance that the creation of audiovisual contents from megachurches have.

Finally, we wanted to reconstruct the preferences and the political view of a different kind of leadership from the other two. It concerns the generic figure that represents the children of the pastors, meaning, the potential inheritors of large religious companies. These running structures suppose a paradox for the successors, because in the one hand they broaden, and in the other hand they restrict the effective possibilities of introducing changes and innovations. As we could see, Pablo's itinerary of consumption is built by opposition, nearly point by point, with the characteristic tastes and choices of the conventional ways of leadership that for example, Nicolas represents. His connection with the system of objects of the church is restricted to music and above all to the exclusive reading -without mediation or intermediaries- of the foremost argument of authority

in Christian life: the bible. He intends to transfer its teachings to the activity that occupies most of his time: we here refer to the leading of two political organizations. Pablo carries out an original endeavor, with very few antecedents in the Evangelical history in Argentina. It concerns a project of territorial construction founded and managed by Christian leaders, that seek to establish an independent structure from the religious platform of the church and from the great party traditions. The goal in this political space is to produce strategic articulations with the Evangelical and the Peronist world to progressively dispute positions in the government.

The complexity and dynamism of the megachurches is partly expressed in the different ways of inhabiting their material culture. The political senses related to consumption are moved there through all kind of cultural commodities that theme and describe the space of beliefs in society. As we could see, the leadership positions that were analyzed associate their tastes and the meaning of their preferences to an active projection of the "Gospel" to the public sphere, professional life and centers of government.

## Conclusions

Throughout this article, we could recognize the way in which three different forces, that nowadays govern a sector of Neo-Pentecostalism, converge. This is: (a) the ascent and stabilization of megachurches as complex institutional forms; (b) the production and distribution of commodities that gather the material culture of each group and (c) the universalized practices of consumption over which religious life is partly based. These three processes converge in a relatively integrated system of social relationships. This is the reason why, whether the studies adopt the point of view of production or consumption, in any case, it is evident that Christian cultural industry modifies in different senses the religious scene in Argentina.

In this context, the consumption relationships that are promoted by Neo-Pentecostalism do not mainly operate at the fringe of institutions, but from their inside. Our case study leads us to distance ourselves from the thesis -dominant in contemporary researches- that associates the deregulation of the religious field with the advance of solitary and disperse consumption ways. Upon this framework, religious material culture tends to reinforce a more individual logic than collective ways of believing. On the contrary, the analyzed itineraries put a different perspective into play.

Evangelic megachurches use material culture as a key element in the socialization of its members through practices that are strongly institutionalized. The participation of ritual contexts -cults, ministeries, events, etc.- as the familiarization with the bible, music, literature, Christian shows in radio and TV, contribute to build a social bond with the group of the cell and with a wider collective

that represents the community of the temple. This proposal does not inhibit the original appropriations, but tries to frame them within the doctrine that they support, negotiating and enabling different forms of internal leadership. In this way, the consumption practices reinforce the institutional surroundings of the church.

What happens with the political life of objects? The material culture of Neo-Pentecostalism moves senses, symbols, discourses and imaginaries that recurrently tackle the religious projection towards secular domains. This general program of action mainly interpellates the leaders in specific areas of social life: the calling for university education and for the excellence in professional development is specially emphasized, the development of audiovisual contents and the creation of a particular point of view on public matters and, finally, the construction of autonomous political structures that (without directly belonging to the church) can articulate with it and other political party spheres. The chosen itineraries describe, in different ways, each one of these processes through the figure of the leader, the cultural producer and the pastor's son. The world of "things" participates in spiritual matters to create an updated version of the "Gospel" and its symbols, with the goal of disputing influence areas in society.

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Хоакин Алгранти

**ПОЛИТИЧКИ ЖИВОТ СТВАРИ.  
ИСТРАЖИВАЊЕ МАТЕРИЈАЛИСТИЧКЕ КУЛТУРЕ И  
КОНЗУМЕРИЗМА ЕВАНГЕЛИЧКИХ ГРУПА У БУЕНОС АЈРЕСУ,  
АРГЕНТИНА**

**Сажетак**

Циљ овог чланка јесте истраживање материјалистичке културе нео-пентекосталних мега-цркава у граду Буеној Ајресу, Аргентина. Да би смо успели у тој намери, реконструисали смо три профила потрошача и начин на који им је дат политички смисао. Профили су анализирани кроз (а) ритуале који омогућавају конзумирање кроз специфичне институције, (б) изабране објекте и (в) политичко значење које се изводи из њихове употребе и коришћења. Чланак је подељен на три дела. У првом делу, даћемо кратак приказ методолошког оквира и представити концепт мега-цркава и материјалистичке културе. У другом делу ћемо емпиријски истраживати три верска конзумеризма који представљају различите модалитете партиципације у животу храмова. И на крају, истраживаћемо политички смисао повезан са културном робом великих евангеличких организација.

**Кључне речи:** материјалистичке култура, мега-цркве, евангелици, лидерство, Аргентина

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