

## Article

# Ethical Aspects of the Prosperity Gospel in the Light of the Arguments Presented by Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa

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**Abstract:** The main aim of the article is to analyze the Prosperity Gospel as an important element of the contemporary pentecostalization of Christianity. The essence of this global process is the emergence of thousands of new Pentecostal denominations and the transformation of other traditional churches into a single, syncretic variety of charismatic Christianity on a global scale. Pentecostal religiosity is characterized, among other things, by prayer in tongues, miracles, exorcisms, healing services, etc. Another key element of this new syncretic religiosity is the Prosperity Gospel which represents the belief that faith may lead to wealth, health and prosperity, and the lack of it ends in poverty, disease, and misfortune. Critics of this new religiosity point out that God must not be seen merely as a realizer of human dreams of happiness, health and wealth. The first part of the article discusses the specific nature of the global process of the pentecostalization of Christianity. It then goes on to present an interpretation of the most important elements of the Prosperity Gospel. In the next part of the article, various charges against the Prosperity Gospel are analyzed, including arguments presented in the widely commented articles that Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa published on this topic in 2017–2018.



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## 1. Introduction

In July 2017, an article entitled “Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism in the USA: A Surprising Ecumenism” was published in the Italian magazine *La Civiltà Cattolica*. The authors are two well-known Christian clerics: the Italian Jesuit Antonio Spadaro, who serves as Editor-in-Chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica* and is a close adviser to Pope Francis, and the Presbyterian pastor Marcelo Figueroa from Argentina who is the Editor-in-Chief of the Argentinian edition of the Vatican magazine *L'Osservatore Romano* and has been a close friend of the current head of the Catholic Church for many years (Spadaro and Figueroa 2017). *La Civiltà Cattolica* is a very important opinion-leading magazine which has been published by Italian Jesuits since 1850. It features articles on topical issues in philosophy, religion, politics, economics and culture as seen from the vantage point of the Catholic worldview. *La Civiltà Cattolica* enjoys a prestigious standing among Catholic periodicals because of its close relationship with the Holy See. As the publication of each issue requires the formal approval of the Vatican Secretariat of State, the contents published in the magazine are regarded by experts and readers as an unofficial doctrinal position presented on many important matters by popes and the Holy See.

The article published by Spadaro and Figueroa in 2017 includes some very critical remarks about one particular form of cooperation, called political ecumenism, which has formed in recent years in the United States between conservative Catholic circles and representatives of conservative neo-Pentecostal and Evangelical protestant communities. The article provoked a very interesting theological and political debate, especially among

the many different Christian denominations in America. As far as the Catholic Church in the United States is concerned, liberal circles have expressed their strong approval for the content of the publication, while conservative circles, which had given a kind of religious blessing to the social and economic policies pursued by President Donald Trump between 2016 and 2020, criticized the text.

An even more massive response followed by a great many scientific and journalistic commentaries, both in the USA and beyond, was triggered by the publication of another article by the same authors, "The Prosperity Gospel: Dangerous and Different" which appeared in *La Civiltà Cattolica* in July 2018. The two Christian clerics closely associated with the Vatican harshly criticized the broadly understood concept of Prosperity Gospel (Spadaro and Figueroa 2018). In their article, they analyzed some of the causes and effects of this religious current and shed some light on the radical contradiction between this selective interpretation of the Christian religion and the theology of Pope Francis, who has repeatedly spoken negatively about the Prosperity Gospel. The authors also tried to demonstrate the link between this thought current and the present crisis of the globalization process in the political, social and economic dimension. In fact, Spadaro and Figueroa believe that in many Christian circles this religious current has been used for many years as a theological grounding for economic neoliberalism. The authors present the problem of the Prosperity Gospel from a global perspective, but focusing particularly on the United States. Even the very title of their study warns of the danger of developing and promoting a "different Gospel", incompatible with the spirit of the true Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is worth noting that in recent decades the Prosperity Gospel has spread around the world owing partially to massive media campaigns launched by many Christian denominations. The important social and political role that this religious concept plays today in many countries of the world is linked in particular to the third wave in the development of Pentecostal communities as part of the global pentecostalization of Christianity (Anderson 2013; Jenkins 2011). What is pentecostalization? What are its characteristic elements? At the heart of this process is the emergence of thousands of new Pentecostal denominations and the transformation of other churches and religious associations into a single, syncretic form of charismatic Christianity in the global dimension. The process of pentecostalization should now be seen as a real revolution within Christianity. Some researchers call these radical changes a Pentecostal Reformation, a new Reformation, an African Reformation, a Reformation that came five centuries late, or a Reformation moved 500 years forward in time. There is every indication that global Christianity is currently witnessing a calm before the storm. In this context, the storm is a symbol of new disputes, conflicts and divisions between the followers of this religion. It is difficult to predict today how profoundly will the new Pentecostal Reformation affect Christianity around the world in the decades and centuries to come (Berdowicz 2020; Anderson 2013; Anderson et al. 2010; Martin 2001).

When it comes to the specificity of Pentecostal religiosity, it is characterized, among other things, by praying in languages, miracles, exorcisms, healings, etc. Another key element of this new syncretic religiosity, present in some groups and proclaimed by some preachers, is the Prosperity Gospel which represents the belief that faith may lead to wealth, health and prosperity, and the lack of it ends in poverty, disease, and misfortune. The advocates of Prosperity Gospel proclaim the omnipotence of God, manifested in miraculous, spectacular events, very often taking place during mass religious meetings at stadiums or in big, special temples built for this purpose (Kobyliński 2016). Critics of this new religiosity, on the other hand, point out that one must not see God merely as a realizer of human dreams of happiness, health and wealth.

The main purpose of the article is to present the most important elements of the global pentecostalization of Christianity and to analyze the specific nature of the Prosperity Gospel, taking into account not only the ethical and theological aspects of this thought current, but also its big impact on social and political life in many countries around the world. The starting point of this study is the thesis that the Prosperity Gospel is an important element of the global process of pentecostalization of Christianity. The author argues that most of

the critical arguments against the Prosperity Gospel, presented by Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa in 2017–2018, should be accepted. The article will verify the following three research hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1.** *The global process of pentecostalization changes the functioning of most Christian denominations and has a significant impact on social and political life in many countries of the world.*

**Hypothesis 2.** *There are many ethical objections against the Prosperity Gospel.*

**Hypothesis 3.** *The research on the Prosperity Gospel is now part of the wider context of the debate on the crisis of the neoliberal economic model and overcoming the negative consequences of the coronavirus pandemic.*

## 2. Characteristics of the Pentecostalization Process

Pentecostal Christianity was born in 1901 at the Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas, in the United States. It is worth noting, however, that the phenomena typical of Pentecostal religiosity, referring to the work of the Holy Spirit (prayer in tongues, prophecy, slain in the Spirit, ecstatic dance, holy laughter, etc.), existed already in the 19th century in the American Holiness Movement, which was a collection of beliefs and practices derived from Methodism and indirectly from the Christian awakening movement of that period.

One of the foremost scholars of Pentecostalism, Allan Heaton Anderson from University of Birmingham, claims that because of the great diversity within Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, it is very difficult to find some common unifying features or distinctiveness by which they might be defined. Pentecostals have defined themselves by so many paradigms that diversity itself has become a primary defining characteristic of their identity. Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have many different faces all over the world. According to Anderson “the term ‘Pentecostalism’ is appropriate for describing all churches and movements globally that emphasize the working of the gifts of the Spirit, both on phenomenological and theological grounds—although not without qualification. A broader definition should emphasize Pentecostalism’s ability to ‘incarnate’ the gospel in different cultural forms. This broad use of ‘Pentecostal’ will often include the terms ‘Charismatic’ and ‘Neocharismatic’; but there will be times when ‘Charismatic’ will refer more narrowly to Pentecostal experience in ‘mainline’ churches” (Anderson 2014, p. 6).

The development of Pentecostal communities involved basically three historical stages, called waves (Coleman and Hackett 2015). The first period was the classic Pentecostalism and the birth of new churches and religious communities in the first half of the 20th century in the USA, which separated themselves from traditional forms of religious life practiced in many Protestant denominations. First-wave Pentecostal Christians emphasized such spectacular religious experiences as baptism in the Holy Spirit or prayer in tongues. They presented a radically conservative approach to the issue of dress code for men and women, expressed a critical attitude towards mass culture, promoted a rigorous and ascetic way of life. First-wave Pentecostalism emphasized faithfulness to the Bible and underscored the sinful nature of this world. It was committed to the promotion of attitudes in life that led towards a depreciation of the temporal world, while emphasizing the value of the after-life.

The second wave in the development of the Pentecostal movement began in the 1950s and penetrated the Episcopal, Anglican and Lutheran Churches, among others, in the form of a charismatic movement. As for Catholicism, the second-wave Pentecostal movement penetrated the Church in 1967 in the USA, and began to develop rapidly in many countries as the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. The novelty of this stage consisted in a greater expansion of Pentecostal communities, the use of radio and television to proclaim the Good News, and the employment of new methods of evangelization.

The third wave, which began in the 1980s, brought about a real revolution. It has led to the emergence of a very strong neo-Pentecostal current. The novelty of this third-wave religiosity is a greater emphasis on healing in the Holy Spirit, and the use of the

Internet in recent years to proclaim the Good News. Neo-Pentecostal Christians are very effective in their use of electronic media and modern marketing strategies in evangelization. Neo-Pentecostalism communicates its message to people not so much by referring to the Scriptures as the Pentecostals did in the first half of the 20th century, but through sacred symbols such as anointing with oil, the laying on of hands, healing services, various forms of exorcism, deliverance prayer, casting out evil spirits, etc. An essential element of third wave neo-Pentecostalism is the change in attitude to folk religion (Kobyliński 2017a). Classic Pentecostalism of the first wave saw folk religion as a form of religious syncretism and was very critical of it as a negative and harmful phenomenon, while for neo-Pentecostalism it plays a very important positive role. Therefore, in some Pentecostal and charismatic communities today there are many elements taken from African religions, e.g., understanding the presence of evil spirits and their impact on people's lives and various methods of freeing man from all forms of evil (Berdowicz 2021). It is worth adding here that the relationship between early Pentecostals and folk religion is a highly debated topic in the field and scholars from Joel Robbins to Juan Sepúlveda acknowledge that the "indigenization" existed in the early Pentecostal churches.

The division of the history of the Pentecostal movement into three waves is very simplistic and inadequate. That is why today it needs a profound correction. This problem is highlighted by, among others, Allan Heaton Anderson, who argues that a global vision of Pentecostalism is necessary, taking into account its local diversity and specificity. In his opinion, Pentecostal history needs to be rewritten. Why? Because historians of Pentecostalism have often reflected a bias history "from a predominantly white American perspective, neglecting (if not completely ignoring) the vita and often a more significant work of Asian, African, African American and Latino Pentecostal pioneers. Some of their histories add the biases of denomination and race, and most of the earlier ones tended to be hagiographies" (Anderson 2014, p. 7).

Anderson argues that in order to understand the importance of and need for rewriting Pentecostal history, we must first critically examine the presuppositions of existing histories compiled in the second half of the 20th century and at the beginning of this century by researchers such as Nils Bloch-Hoell, Malcolm Callay, Christian Lalive d'Épinay, Walter Hollenweger, Donald Dayton, Harvey Cox, Grant Wacker, Donald Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori. "Pentecostalism that is made in the USA is only one part of the total picture of many forms of Pentecostalism and the hidden treasures of these local histories need to be discovered. (. . .) Despite the undeniably courageous work of the early Pentecostal missionaries from the West, the more important contribution of African, Asian, Latin American and Pacific evangelists and pastors must be properly recognized" (Anderson 2014, p. 11). One of the reasons for the distorted picture we have of Pentecostal history is the problem of documentary sources. "Our writing of early Pentecostal history outside the western world almost entirely depends on letters, reports and periodicals of western Pentecostals and their missionaries. These documents were usually loaded for bolter financial and prayer support in North America and Europe; and so the reports mostly talked about the activities of the missionaries themselves and not their so-called 'native workers'" (Anderson 2014, p. 12). One of the elements of the Pentecostal movement, present in recent decades in some groups and proclaimed by some preachers, is the Prosperity Gospel. Some neo-Pentecostal Christians preach a theology of material success and prosperity, promote political and economic activity, encourage the multiplication of one's own wealth (Attanasi and Yong 2012). This kind of religiosity is supposed to provide man with complete self-realization in the present.

It is worth emphasizing that a Pentecostal social ethic is based on belief in the power of the liberating Spirit. Allan Heaton Anderson claims that Pentecostal and Charismatic experience assists in the formation of a contextual Pentecostal theology, but there are very real dangers. In his opinion, sometimes an overemphasis on success and power results in a failure to identify with the poor and oppressed in their affliction. Pentecostalism may not simply be identified with a conservative, made-in-America political ideology.

Conservative politics there is, but it is much more nuanced. Outside the western world Pentecostals make their own decisions regarding political affiliation and involvement, and the divisions, varieties and individualism that are intrinsic to the nature of Pentecostalism make its politics and economics impossible to define with any precision" (Anderson 2014, p. 299).

Many neo-Pentecostal churches referring to the Prosperity Gospel are organized hierarchically, like large companies or large multinational concerns (Miller and Yamamori 2020; Pace 2016). A very clear and emphatic exemplification of this phenomenon is the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Igreija Universal do Reino de Deus), which operates in Brazil and many other countries. This group, also known by the name "Stop Suffering," has branches across Latin America. It has kept an intermediary language somewhere between Spanish and Portuguese that gives it a peculiar type of carefully studied communication. Suffice it to analyze the proclamation of the Brazilian Universal Church to find a strong message of prosperity and well-being, tied to personal visits to the temples in order to receive multiple benefits (Spadaro and Figueroa 2018). The financial power of this neo-Pentecostal denomination is now compared with the largest corporations operating in the country. It is worth noting at this point that Brazil is a country which clearly illustrates how neo-Pentecostal currents weaken the Catholic Church in particular. Several decades ago, Catholics represented a vast majority of the country's population. Today, only half of Brazilians belong to the Catholic Church. Tens of millions of Brazilian Catholics have become members of thousands of different Pentecostal denominations (Lin 2020; Eirich 2017; Lindhardt et al. 2016; Eckholt 2013). Analyzing the development of Pentecostal communities in countries such as Brazil and Chile, in the 1960s the Swiss sociologist Christian Lalive D'Epinay and the German sociologist Emilio Willems ascribed the growth of Pentecostalism to processes of urbanisation, migration, social anomie and the dissolution of rural communities (Lalive D'Epinay 1969; Willems 1967).

As for the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, it was founded on 9 July 1977 by Edir Macedo. Its headquarters are in Rio de Janeiro. This Christian community now has several million followers in the world. In recent years, it has become the second largest Pentecostal denomination in Brazil. It is present in dozens of countries, especially in Portuguese-speaking ones. The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God is one of the most controversial churches in Brazil. It has enormous financial resources from tithing, which has made it a media powerhouse. It owns the national newspaper *Folha Universal*, for example, with a circulation of two and a half million copies, a network of radio stations and, above all, the large television station Rede Record, the second largest one in Brazil. The founder of the Church, Edira Macedo, is one of Brazil's most controversial religious leaders. He has rejected all forms of puritanism characteristic of Brazilian Pentecostalism of the first and second wave, calls on his faithful to be generous in supporting the church, attacks all forms of rational and critical reflection on the phenomenon of religion. Pastor Macedo gathers large crowds in stadiums. He is accused of having amassed a fortune at the expense of his faithful, of running his church like a large international corporation, and that his activities are not so much religious as political and economic. According to *Forbes*, with assets worth about 1 billion U.S. dollars he is the richest pastor in Brazil (Siuda-Ambroziak 2018; Garrard-Burnett 2013).

It appears that the change in approach to folk religion and the use of the concept of Prosperity Gospel in evangelization are two key factors that have driven the revolutionary expansion of neo-Pentecostal Christianity. During the first decades of their existence, Pentecostal communities grew very slowly and had relatively few followers. The development of these denominations clearly accelerated in the second half of the last century. As a result of these changes, in 2000 Pentecostal communities around the world had the total of 100 million believers. Over the last 20 years, a real Pentecostal demographic revolution has been witnessed. It has led to radical changes on the map of global Christianity, which is becoming increasingly Pentecostal. There are currently an estimated 700–800 million Pentecostals around the world, and the various Pentecostal denominations will have a total

of billion followers by 2025 (Botha 2007). At the beginning of the 20th century, there were 1600 Christian denominations in the world; a hundred years later this number has risen to 34,000. When it comes to the Christian religion today, there are around 50,000 different types of churches, religious associations and groups across all continents. The vast majority of these denominations are Pentecostal.

The reasons for such an unusual growth of Pentecostal communities are both spiritual and sociological. Pentecostalism undoubtedly offers a form of religious experience that is alive and meets the people's spiritual needs in a new way. In sociological terms, social and economic problems in Africa or South America, poverty and social injustice, certainly contribute to the growth of these denominations. "New Pentecostal movements and communities give their members a sense of importance and identity, enhance their self-esteem, provide a sense of stabilization and settlement. The sense of belonging and being part of a family is particularly important for emigrants or social outcasts. In many countries, charismatic communities help their members overcome poverty and social isolation, provide support and hope for the future" (Kobyliński 2016, p. 103). Some scholars (David Maxwell, Birgit Meyer, and Bernice Martin) convincingly point out the forms of collective solidarity many individuals find in Pentecostalism which runs counter the individualizing project of neoliberal economics (Maxwell 2006).

Looking at predictions about the development of global Christianity in the coming decades, it is worth noting the information published by American researchers at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity which has been operating for several decades now at the Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. The university is one of the best-known Evangelical academic centers in the USA. The South Hamilton Science Centre is probably the most reliable research center monitoring the demographic trends of all Christian denominations around the world and providing extremely valuable empirical information on Christianity in the planetary dimension. Studies conducted by researchers at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity are interdisciplinary, combining many fields of knowledge including theology, philosophy, demography, sociology, ethnography, anthropology, linguistics and missiology. The Centre has an extensive collection of information on the past, present and future of Christianity in various regions of the world (Kobyliński 2017b). South Hamilton researchers have demonstrated that the number of Christians living in Latin America is now significantly higher than that of Christians on the European continent. By contrast, 100 years ago six times as many Christians lived in Europe as in Latin America. In 2025, Africa will have the largest number of Christians: between 600 and 700 million.

In 2050, Asia will also surpass Europe when it comes to the number of Christian denominations (Johnson et al. 2016). An analysis of current religious and demographic trends shows that in the mid-21st century, 80% of all Christians in the world will live on three continents of the Global South—i.e., Asia, Africa and Latin America—compared to only 20% in 1900. When it comes to individual countries, in 2025 the largest number of Christians will live in China—200 million believers. Research shows that in 2030 there will be as many as 250 million Christians in this most populated country in the world (Grim et al. 2018). A vast majority of them will be neo-Pentecostal Christians for whom the message of Prosperity Gospel, success and wealth as a manifestation of God's blessing corresponds perfectly to the modern mentality of Chinese society and the Beijing government's agenda for developing the country's economic power. A very persuasive exemplification of this trend in the People's Republic of China are the "Churches of Wenzhou." Wenzhou is a large Eastern port in the province of Zhejiang, where great red crosses have appeared on many buildings. They usually indicate the presence of a "Wenzhou Church," which is a community originating from various local businessmen and tied to the Prosperity Gospel movement (Spadaro and Figueroa 2018; see also Cao 2010).

### 3. Meanderings of the Prosperity Gospel

Research papers on the Prosperity Gospel provide a variety of descriptive definitions characterizing this very fashionable religious trend today, called interchangeably as the Prosperity Theology, the Word of Faith, or the Health and Wealth Gospel. An element common to many different versions of this religious current, which does not in fact represent a homogeneous or coherent canon of philosophical or theological ideas, is the claim that God rewards his believers in this life with happiness, health, and wealth. At the heart of this concept is the belief that God wants his faithful to have a prosperous and fulfilled life, that is, to be economically rich, physically healthy, and happy in their personal, family, and professional lives. This type of Christianity places people's temporal wellbeing at the center of their prayers and religious practices, and makes the Highest Creator one who realizes all of the believers' thoughts and desires (Bowler 2018). The Prosperity Gospel is mainly proposed in the media and by millionaire pastors and missionary organizations with strong religious, social and political influence.

The most controversial aspect of such an interpretation of the Christian message is the fact that religious faith is illegitimately transferred from the spiritual and the invisible into the sphere of material consumption, accumulation of riches, and well-being. In this context, poverty, suffering, and disease become signs of spiritual impotence, because God supposedly wants all people to be happy, rich, and healthy, fulfilling their desires already here on earth. Proponents of the Health and Wealth Gospel believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ overcame not only sin and death, but also poverty and disease. And so Christians, by embracing an appropriate way of thinking and speaking, may expect or ask wealth and health from God as part of their divine heritage. This new interpretation of the Christian religion, which in the past was mainly associated with American Pentecostal communities, is now increasingly attracting millions of believers from different ethnic, religious, racial and economic backgrounds around the world (Garnett 2021; see also Kobylński 2015).

It is worth noting at this point that in the United States proclamation of the Prosperity Gospel has been combined in recent years with a rapid growth of the population of non-denominational Christians. This new trend consists in that those interested in the religious message are increasingly looking not so much for doctrinally well-defined Christian denominations, but rather for various independent speakers and preachers (Miller 1998). Non-denominational Christians include, above all, various neo-Pentecostal communities that do not form part of any denomination, as well as apostolic communities defined as associated with congregations that put emphasis on the living apostles, prophets, and other charismatic evangelizers. Richard Flory and Brad Christerson argue that many Christian non-denominational leaders engage in a kind of "religious entrepreneurship." This means that they act as typical entrepreneurs, offering their customers (believers) a finished product in the form of miracles/releases/healings. If a religious leader is known and his popularity is growing and leads to an increase in the number of his followers, he must have a good "marketing and sales plan" (Flory and Christerson 2017).

Kate Bowler, author of *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*, argues that the Health and Wealth Gospel is primarily based on the theology of Essek William Kenyon (1867–1948). Bowler's main contribution was to show how the rise of the Prosperity Gospel reflected a particular American ideological mix of post-War optimism and faith in the equilibrium of the free market. Kenyon was a pastor of the New Covenant Baptist Church and founder and president of the Bethel Bible Institute in Spencer, Massachusetts. This popular radio preacher believed that Christians who speak out their desires to God are sure to receive the blessing of health and happiness. In his opinion, positive words, spoken out loud, have the power to realize God's gifts. He claimed that concrete material reality could be changed by the power of faith. Consequently, faith can lead to wealth, health, and prosperity, while lack of faith leads to poverty, disease, and misfortune. Kenyon's views inspired Fred Francis Bosworth (1877–1958), who was an admired Pentecostal evangelist

known as the “healer of faith.” Kenyon and Bosworth believed that human words filled with faith were one of the many tools of divine healing (Compston 2019; Bowler 2018).

In the 1940s and 1950s, their religious views were referred to by famous Pentecostal pastors such as Oral Roberts, William Branham and Gordon Lindsay. In the 1960s, with the birth of the charismatic movement in the Catholic Church, some elements of the Prosperity Gospel began to penetrate Catholic communities as well. In the second half of the last century, this new interpretation of the Christian religion was promoted on radio and television by a number of celebrity preachers (Rex Humbard, Robert Schuller, Jim and Tammy Bakker). Today, the best known promoters of the Health and Wealth Gospel include such evangelizers as Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Benny Hinn, Robert Tilton, Joel Osteen, or Joyce Meyer. It is worth noting that Benny Hinn and Joyce Meyer have withdrawn from the radical version of the Prosperity Gospel and have publicly expressed this. In the United States millions of people regularly attend megachurches that spread the Prosperity Gospel. The preachers, prophets and apostles who have joined this branch of neo-Pentecostalism have taken up more and more important posts in the mass media, published an enormous quantity of books that have rapidly become best-sellers, and given speeches that are often transmitted to millions of people via the internet and social media (Spadaro and Figueroa 2018).

Many important comments about this very popular religious current were made in 2018 by Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa. Their article provoked an avalanche of journalistic and scientific commentaries because it touched on a very important and relevant problem concerning the connections between religion and politics. Some of the most interesting opinions were presented in the United States, as well as in Vatican media and other Catholic media around the world. On 18 July 2018, when the Italian and English version of the article was published, many media outlets in the United States made an extensive presentation of the text. It is worth noting that on that day the American news agency Associated Press published an article on its website entitled Vatican-OK'd Journal Strikes out again at US Evangelicals, written by the Roman correspondent Nicole Winfield. In her text, the American journalist said that “a Vatican-approved journal has dismissed ‘Prosperity Gospel’ as a pseudo theology dangerously tied up with the American Dream and President Donald Trump’s politics, launching its second major critique of American evangelicals in as many years” (Winfield 2018). The Associated Press correspondent pointed out that “Trump campaigned in part on his record as a wealthy real estate developer and businessman, and ‘Prosperity Gospel’ preacher Paula White is a key Trump adviser. She and another prosperity preacher, Bishop Wayne T. Jackson, were among the religious leaders selected to offer prayers at Trump’s swearing-in” (Winfield 2018).

At the same time, Vatican paper *L’Osservatore Romano* published an article entitled “The Danger of a Different Gospel.” Its author, Fabrizio Contessa, fully agreed with the main points of the article published in *La Civiltà Cattolica*. Contessa said that a very strong criticism of the Health and Wealth Gospel came from Pope Francis. Since the beginning of his pontificate, he had repeatedly emphasized the dangers inherent in this religious current. On 28 July 2013, speaking in Brazil to members of the Latin American Bishops’ Council, Pope Francis explicitly criticized those pastoral activities of the Catholic Church which promoted a kind of Prosperity Gospel (Contessa 2018; see also Kučko 2020a). In Brazil Pope Francis said the following words: “The decision for missionary discipleship will encounter temptation. It is important to know where the evil spirit is afoot in order to aid our discernment. ( . . . ) Functionalism. Its effect on the Church is paralyzing. More than being interested in the road itself, it is concerned with fixing holes in the road. A functionalist approach has no room for mystery; it aims at efficiency. It reduces the reality of the Church to the structure of an NGO. What counts are quantifiable results and statistics. The Church ends up being run like any other business organization. It applies a sort of ‘theology of prosperity’ to the organization of pastoral work.” (Pope 2013).

In their article, Spadaro and Figueroa recall the most important features of the Health and Wealth Gospel that researchers studying this important and complex religious, social,

and political phenomenon have been talking and writing about for many years. The Italian Jesuit and the Argentine pastor focus their attention on the United States, but note that this religious current has in fact spread to all continents. When it comes to Africa, the impact of the Prosperity Theology is particularly evident in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa. Also in Asia, this religious current has many followers, especially in China, India and South Korea. Today, the largest crowds of supporters of this interpretation of the Christian religion live in Latin America. Over the past 40 years, in countries such as Brazil, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Colombia, Chile and Argentina preachers proclaiming the Prosperity Gospel on television, radio, in stadiums and more recently on the Internet have brought tens of millions of followers around to their ideas.

The authors of the article published in *La Civiltà Cattolica* argue that Jesus does not promise his disciples health and wealth. For this reason, there is nothing more distant from, or even dangerous to the Christian faith than the criterion of pragmatism, effectiveness and success, which inevitably transforms the Church into a kind of international corporation. It may be a case of the error of “religious anthropocentrism” which transforms God into an extraordinary power that serves to satisfy man’s needs. The Supreme Being is stripped off his majesty. Religious experience loses its transcendent dimension. In addition, biblical passages are interpreted in an entirely functionalist way, aimed at justifying the accumulation of riches and self-realization in this world, without the prospect of eschatological salvation. This way, the Church becomes a big supermarket where one can satisfy one’s needs in life, while religion is transformed into a strictly pragmatic and utilitarian phenomenon (Jones and Woodbridge 2010; see also Bartelink 2020).

A very valuable critical remark concerning ethics expressed in *La Civiltà Cattolica* is related to the problem of miracles and healings. Spadaro and Figueroa rightly claim that this kind of promise of a life free from pain and suffering is simply false. Moreover, some preachers proclaiming the Prosperity Gospel may be using various techniques of mental manipulation to ensure the effective fulfillment of their promises. Of course, many clergy and leaders do not manipulate people. Unfortunately, in many countries some neo-Pentecostal leaders make false diagnoses about the health of people attending healing services. Such opinions may at times be so suggestive that people who are genuinely ill give up the medical treatment they need. Religious leaders should exercise greater caution, accountability and a very clear distinction, especially in the case of sick and suffering people, between the natural and the supernatural. Unethical behavior in this sphere may in some cases critically affect the health and life of other people (Berdowicz 2020).

Another important ethical complaint that Spadaro and Figueroa raise against the Health and Wealth Gospel is that this religious current promotes social egoism. In their opinion, such religiosity does not develop commitment to social justice, it shows no interest in the poor or the excluded. The Prosperity Gospel not only deepens social individualism and destroys any sense of solidarity, but also encourages people to adopt a fideistic attitude in which only religious faith, rather than social and political engagement, is able to ensure the well-being of individuals and society as a whole. Consequently, such “false” religiosity hinders any political or economic reforms that would promote social justice. This destructive influence of the Health and Wealth Gospel can be observed most clearly in the poor countries of Africa, Asia and South America, where people infected with these religious ideas become vulnerable, unable to engage in mature political activity, susceptible to new forms of economic exploitation (Kućko 2020b).

The criticism against the Prosperity Gospel, formulated by Spadaro and Figueroa, is very synthetic and therefore requires additional thorough interdisciplinary research. One of the very important books that offers a deeper analysis of this phenomenon is the 2015 study entitled *Pastures of Plenty: Tracing Religio-Scapes of Prosperity Gospel in Africa and Beyond*. The editor of this collective work is Andreas Heuser from Basel University. The book contains the works of over 20 researchers from many countries around the world. Heuser brings contributors of diverse disciplinary backgrounds, ranging from theological, religious, philosophical, and sociological studies, in a volume that is an interdisciplinary

collection of mostly case studies, offering varying perspectives on African, but also Latin, North American and Asian examples of articulations of the Prosperity Gospel. The most interesting message of this book is the claim about the transmission of core Prosperity Gospel formulae into the wider relief of African or Asian religions.

According to Andreas Heuser the Prosperity Gospel is “a theological locus with porous boundaries to non-Christian beliefs and practices... The pentecostalization of non-Christian discourses on well-being and prosperity may be the most surprising insight into Prosperity Gospel ‘pastures of plenty’” (Heuser 2015, p. 22). Recent observations indicate such trans-religious osmosis of the Prosperity Gospel rhetoric, metaphors, and practices into African folk-Islam as well as into some layers of traditional African religions. This new cartography of the Prosperity Gospel in sub-Saharan Africa highlights the Pentecostalisation of African religious landscapes. Moreover, the emergences of trans-religious beliefs and practices around concepts of material salvation have created ‘religio-scapes of Prosperity Gospel’ in Africa. The survey on the socioeconomics of African prosperity-oriented Pentecostalism firstly traces the historic genealogy of Prosperity Gospel as transposable message. It appears as a generic formula in paradigmatic reinventions of Pentecostalism in post-second and/or cold war America and in its globalisation in postcolonial Africa.

#### 4. Political and Economic Implications of Religion

The growing political and economic influence of Pentecostal communities in many countries is increasingly becoming the subject of extensive interdisciplinary research. One of the many such initiatives is the international research project entitled “Political Pentecostalism: the New Social Commitment of the Pentecostal Churches and its Theological Justification.” The project was launched in December 2019 to continue until December 2021 by the Institute for the Universal Church and Mission (Institut für Weltkirche und Mission), an academic institute of the German Bishops’ Conference at the Sankt Georgen Jesuit college in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. It was founded in 2009 in order to develop the academic reflection on Christian mission and the worldwide Church. The German institute cooperates with other scientific centers in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia conducting interdisciplinary research related to religion.

It is worth adding that leaders of the Catholic Church in Germany are pioneers when it comes to studying the development of Pentecostal communities around the world from the Catholic perspective. The project currently underway in Frankfurt am Main is a continuation of interdisciplinary research launched in the 1990s. For three decades now representatives of various scientific disciplines, funded by the German Bishops’ Conference, have been analyzing Pentecostal Christianity in the context of new religious movements developing around the world. A culmination of this research was an international scientific conference organized in Rome in 2013 by German bishops under the auspices of the Vatican, entitled “Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic: New Religious Movements as a Challenge to the Catholic Church.” This event was groundbreaking in that it launched research into new forms of Christian religiosity in many countries of the world. Similar scientific symposia were organized by the German Bishops’ Conference in 2016 in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, and in 2018 in Guatemala City, the capital of Guatemala. These three very important international conferences resulted in valuable publications that present the religious developments we are currently witnessing from an interdisciplinary point of view (Vellguth 2017; Ruh 2013).

One particular achievement of the project currently underway in Frankfurt am Main is the publication of a book entitled Political Pentecostalism: Four Synoptic Surveys from Asia, Africa and Latin America (Fontana and Luber 2021). The authors of this publication claim that the last decade has witnessed fundamental changes in relations between religion and politics. Religious symbols, substantiations and practices are increasingly being witnessed in the political discourse of Pentecostal Christians in the Global South. Performative religious practices applied in political contexts, such as the anointing of state authorities, prophecies, war prayers, etc., have attracted the attention of many scholars around the

world. The authors explain these developments in Africa, Asia and Latin America and look for answers to the question of whether any significant link can be identified between the many seemingly isolated elements of Pentecostal engagement in the political sphere around the world.

On 28–30 July 2021, as part of a project concerned with the social involvement of Pentecostal communities, an international virtual conference on “Political Pentecostalism” was organized by the Sankt Georgen Jesuit college in Frankfurt am Main ([Political Pentecostalism 2021](#)). This most inspiring intellectual event was attended by researchers from 40 countries. The main aim of the conference was to present the findings of sociological, theological, religious and political studies—conducted in African, Asian and Latin American countries—on the social involvement of various Pentecostal churches. The dynamic development of these communities has created a new tension between religion and politics that challenges the academia, churches, politics and society as a whole.

The Frankfurt am Main conference was summarized by Archbishop Ludwig Schick, President of the Commission for the Universal Church of the German Bishops’ Conference (Kommission Weltkirche der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz). He concluded that the dynamic spread of Evangelical and Pentecostal communities around the world makes it necessary to think critically about their growing political influence, e.g., in the United States and Brazil ([Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2021](#)). In his opinion, the fact that the main Christian churches in Europe are being abandoned leads mainly to secularization and giving up on religion in general, while in other parts of the world a strong turn towards Evangelical or Pentecostal groups is being witnessed. Schick emphasized that Catholics should look to Pentecostal Christians not only with an attitude of defensiveness, but with some openness as well, and a true willingness to discern. There is a need for critical thought in particular when it comes to the political involvement of Pentecostals, who very often introduce religion into politics in a very direct way. Many of these political efforts, for example in Brazil and in African countries, justify asking about the image of Christianity that is presented to the public, and about what lies behind this understanding of man and society. In this context, the problem emerges of the unacceptable practice of mixing politics and religion, and the negative effects of such tendencies for social peace ([Sadowski 2017](#)). As concrete examples of this kind of phenomena can be indicated the so-called “Bible block” in Brazil that led to the questionable impeachment of Dilma Rouseff in 2016 and the rise of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018.

The findings of studies conducted in Frankfurt am Main relate primarily to the large galaxy of Pentecostal communities currently operating in countries of the Global South, very often using the concept of Prosperity Gospel in their teaching. Massimo Faggioli has recently made some very interesting remarks about religion and politics in the US in a study entitled *Joe Biden and Catholicism in the United States* ([Faggioli 2021](#)). The book was published on January 20, 2021, the day President Joe Biden was inaugurated. In a sense, this study may be seen as an addition to the two articles that Spadaro and Figueroa had published in *La Civiltà Cattolica*. Why? Because Faggioli develops many threads that these authors had only signaled. This includes in particular a more in-depth analysis of the internal tensions and conflicts present in American Catholicism today, which need to be adequately interpreted in order to better understand the doctrinal foundations of cooperation between conservative Catholic circles and the currents of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity referring, among other things, to the idea of Prosperity Gospel. Faggioli also shows pretty well the process of pentecostalization of a consistent part of the US Catholicism.

This author analyses the relationship that currently exists between politics and religion in the United States from the perspective of liberal Catholicism. He looks with hope at the significant ideological similarity between Catholic President Joe Biden and Pope Francis. In his view, relations between the United States and the Vatican have clearly suffered during the Trump administration due to the incompatibility of the worldviews of Pope Francis and the host of the White House in the years 2016–2020. The situation changed

radically with the beginning of Joe Biden's presidency. Faggioli argues that the Vatican and the United States should now jointly undertake an extremely difficult and important task of institutional leadership on a global scale, providing adequate responses to the upheavals that are currently witnessed at practically all levels: environmental, economic, social, cultural and political.

There is no doubt that internal doctrinal tensions in the Catholic Church in America have serious political consequences. The fate of liberal Catholicism in the USA is intertwined with the future of Pope Francis' pontificate—that is, with its long-term fate and the anticipated continuation of his reforms by future popes. Faggioli is unequivocally in favor of American liberal Catholicism, which highlights issues of social justice, migration policy, or the fight against global warming, while harshly criticizing the views of Catholic conservatives who focus their attention on cultural wars and disputes related to abortion and the legal protection of conceived life. He believes that objection to cultural wars and the defense of traditional values represent an ideological attitude, while the position of Pope Francis and liberal Catholics in America is anti-ideological. In my opinion, Faggioli rightly draws attention to the social and political implications of the Gospel, but one can hardly agree with his criticism of conservative Catholicism in America for defending traditional values not only in the era of President Donald Trump, but over the past few decades in general (Kobyliński 2020b).

An interesting diagnosis of modern American Catholicism from a liberal perspective has been presented by Massimo Borghesi in his book *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, published in Italian in March 2021, where he harshly criticizes the views of American neoconservatives (Borghesi 2021). It is a group of Catholic thinkers who have had a great influence over the past three decades not only on the Catholic Church in the United States, but also on Catholicism around the world. The essence of their doctrinal position is an affirmative approach to economic liberalism, principles of the free market economy, and the theological virtues of capitalism on the one hand, and the defense of traditional values and objection to the radical demands of the moral revolution on the other. Borghesi points out that the doctrinal foundations of this concept were developed by Michael Novak (1933–2017). In 1982, he published a book entitled *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, which became a bible of this new thought current (Novak 1982). Borghesi is right when he draws the attention of Catholic neoconservatives to their underestimation of social justice and the principle of solidarity; one can hardly agree, however, with his views about the defense of traditional values and the contemporary cultural wars.

## 5. Conclusions

The main cognitive contribution of this article is the diagnosis of modern forms of the Prosperity Gospel, which are increasingly leading to serious political, social and economic consequences in many countries of the world. An adequate interpretation of this syncretic religious current is necessary today in order to better understand the radical changes that have taken place in relations between religion and politics over the last dozen or so years. The analyses carried out in this article substantiate the following five research conclusions.

Firstly, interdisciplinary scientific studies conducted by many different researchers clearly show that the global process of pentecostalization leads to deep changes in most Christian communities around the world. There is no doubt that the consequences of new thought currents within Christianity may be compared today to the effects of Martin Luther's Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The change in attitude to folk religion and the use of the Prosperity Gospel seem to be two key factors that have enabled the expansion of neo-Pentecostal Christianity. The global process of pentecostalization should now be seen as a real revolution within Christianity. Some researchers call these radical changes a Pentecostal Reformation, a new Reformation, an African Reformation, a Reformation that is five centuries late, or a Reformation moved 500 years forward in time. It is necessary

now to continue extensive scientific research into the causes and effects of the global pentecostalization of Christianity.

Secondly, the relationship between religion and politics requires an appropriate scientific diagnosis today. The problem concerns all cultures and religions, in fact. When it comes to Christianity, it is very important to analyze the political implications of contemporary neo-Pentecostal currents. In recent years, religious symbols, substantiations and practices are increasingly being witnessed in the political discourse of Pentecostal Christians not only in the United States, but also in many countries of the Global South. Performative religious practices applied in political contexts, such as the anointing of state authorities, prophecies, war prayers, etc., have attracted the attention of many scholars around the world. The dynamic development of these communities creates a new tension between religion and politics that is a challenge to the academia, churches, politics and society as a whole. In this context, the value of interdisciplinary research conducted over many years on new religious phenomena by the Institute for the Universal Church and Mission in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, should be particularly appreciated.

Thirdly, ethical concerns relating to the Prosperity Gospel must not be underestimated. Unfortunately, quite often the proclamation of such religious views leads to mental manipulation or the banalization of religion. Of course, many clergy and leaders do not manipulate people. Especially morally reprehensible are the promises of easy and mass spiritual and physical healings addressed to the sick and suffering. Jesus of Nazareth did not promise his disciples health, wealth, or a life of pleasure. He never said that all suffering would stop already in this life and people would no longer fall ill. For this reason, there is nothing more distant from or even dangerous to the Christian faith than the criterion of effectiveness and functionality which inevitably lead to the transformation of churches and religious communities into corporations aimed at making profit, wealth and temporal prosperity. Antonio Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa claim that the Health and Wealth Gospel promotes social egoism. This kind of religiosity does not promote commitment to social justice, it shows no interest in the poor or the excluded. The Prosperity Gospel not only deepens social individualism, but also encourages people to adopt a fideistic attitude in which only religious faith, rather than social and political engagement, is able to ensure the well-being of individuals and society as a whole. Consequently, such a selective form of religiosity hinders any political or economic reforms that would promote social justice. This influence of the Health and Wealth Gospel can be observed most clearly in the poor countries of Africa, Asia and South America, where people influenced by these religious ideas become vulnerable, unable to engage in mature political activity, susceptible to new forms of economic exploitation.

Fourthly, it is worth noting that the Prosperity Gospel plays a relatively minor role in European countries. This is mainly due to the declining role of the Christian religion on the Old Continent, which is becoming increasingly post-Christian. This religious current may be observed mostly in Central and Eastern Europe, where it has strengthened its influence in recent years in the course of the pentecostalization of Catholicism and many Protestant communities in the region. In this context, particularly profound changes took place in the Catholic Church in Poland, where after 2007 mass religious meetings for hundreds of thousands of believers were held at stadiums or sports halls—just like in the United States or countries of the Global South—with speakers and preachers invited from Asia, Africa and South America (Kobyliński 2014). It appears that in most secularized European societies, the Prosperity Gospel seems to be promoting not so much a mature form of religion, but rather its banalization. In this context, it is worth noting the book entitled “Faith and Religion in Modern Society”, published in May 2021 in France by the Belgian Cardinal Joseph De Kesel, Archbishop of Malines-Bruxelles. He stresses that in western Europe Christianity is no longer a cultural religion. The end of this version of religion does not mean the end of Christianity tout court, however. It is just the end of one of its historical forms. De Kesel argues that the negative effects of secularization should be acknowledged, and the irrational desires and attempts to revive the past should be abandoned. He believes

that Christianity can find an audience on the European continent if it begins to regain its original credibility. Christianity should rediscover its ability to create a culture of encounter and dialogue with all who want to humanize the contemporary society and reject the marginalization of religion in the public sphere (De Kesel 2021; see also Lucas 2021).

Fifthly, analyses concerning the Prosperity Gospel fit into the broader context of the current debate around overcoming the negative consequences of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic. New solutions for the future of the world after the current crisis are of interest today to many philosophers, politicians, economists, sociologists, religious leaders (Kobyliński 2020a; Waleszczyński 2019; Rozmarynowska 2018; Sadowski 2018). In the coming years, it will be very important to develop a purpose-first economy that prioritizes the meaning of what is done (the impact on society and the environment) over the mere profitability criterion. This means that a corporate balance sheet should not be limited only to economic gains and losses, while ignoring the impact of economic activity on society and the environment (Sadowski 2020; Meller 2019). Which is why some rightly argue that the current neoliberal model of global economy must be changed, that the economic role of individual countries should be increased, and the category of social justice needs to be appreciated (Mazzucato 2020). Rejecting the vision of God, man and the world proposed by the Prosperity Gospel, challenging the radical version of neoliberal economics, and reviving empathy for the poor and excluded should lead to a broader practice of the attitude of solidarity. It is certainly social solidarity that should now become one of the most important civic virtues on a global scale.

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