

When Sects become Middle Class:
Impression Management among Middle Class
Pentecostals in Argentina

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Abstract

Sect-to-church theory assumes that sects will become more church-like, as members' socio-economic status improves: abandoning tension-related characteristics, they decrease the level of tension with their social environment. Studying Pentecostal middle class congregations (MCCs) in Argentina, this article shows that the reduction of tension involves impression management: the studied MCCs display middle class features (e.g. educational training) and selectively shield tension-related practices (e.g. glossolalia) from the glances of non-Pentecostal peers. Instead of abandoning tension-related practices to reduce tension, MCCs strategically adjust their religious practices depending on the extent to which these are accessible for relevant outsiders, switching between sect-like and church-like styles of religion.

INTRODUCTION

Sect-to-church theory describes the circumstance under which sects turn into churches. Among other factors, social upward mobility of sects is thought to provoke such a transformation. When improving their socio-economic status (SES), sects are assumed to leave behind the key attribute that distinguishes them from churches: high tension with their social environment. Abandoning tension-related characteristics (e.g. faith-healing, exorcisms), they turn increasingly into churches (cf. Iannaccone 1994; Niebuhr 1929; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Stark and Finke 2000). However, when reducing the tension with their social environment, sects may leave behind distinctive characteristics, weakening the satisfaction that members experience from their participation (Iannaccone 1994; Poloma 2005:59; Tracey 2012:92).

This study argues that religious organizations which experience upward social-mobility may not necessarily abandon tension-related practices but selectively shield them. Drawing on the notion of impression management (cf. Bolino et al. 2008; Elsbach, Sutton and Principe 1998; Goffman 1959; Joosse 2012), the study suggests that selective shielding processes allow for the simultaneous withdrawal and maintenance of tension-related practices: specific sect-like practices are transferred to protected back regions, thereby shielding them from exposure to the social environment; whereas church-like styles of religion are performed on the more visible front regions. Accordingly, performing sect or church-like styles of religion does not only depend on the long run change of the socio-economic status of the group, but on the extent to which religious practices are potentially visible for relevant outsiders at a given moment in time. The possibility of switching between sect- and church-like styles of religion mitigates the need to abandon distinctive, tension-related characteristics. Highlighting the impression management of religious organizations that face pressure to adapt to their social environment, this article proposes to regard these as moving flexibly between different points on the sect-to-church axis, rather than being located on a specific position on this axis.

This contribution studies sect-to-church transitions among Pentecostal middle class congregations (MCCs) in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Pentecostalism is perhaps globally the most widespread religious movement that falls into the sect category, while at the same time experiencing a growth in middle class membership. Representing the fastest growing branch of Christianity in the 20th century, it has spread massively in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and, today, counts close to 600 million followers worldwide (Johnson 2013). Originally known as a lower class movement that particularly attracted those most affected by the “pathogens of poverty” (Chesnut 1997:172), Pentecostalism is gaining momentum among middle classes (Bastian 2008; Berger 2009; Freston 1997; Hasu 2012; Martin 1995; Martin 2002; Stewart-Gambino and Wilson 1997).

The impact that growing middle class membership is having on the shape of Pentecostalism, however, is not well-studied: while middle class Pentecostalism is more researched in the context of the US and megachurches (cf. Ellingson 2009; Poloma 1989), in Latin America, where the movement is the most prominent religious option after Catholicism, there are few empirical insights about the characteristics of Pentecostal congregations with high middle class appeal. Scholars studying Latin American Pentecostalism have raised divergent assumptions regarding its shape: while some suppose social adaption processes among MCCs (cf. Corten 1995; Schäfer 2009a), others expect them to be inclined towards Neo-Pentecostalism (cf. Ihrke-Buchroth 2013; Martin 2002:4; O'Neill 2010:10; Robbins 2004:121-122).

The contribution of this article is twofold: (a) on a theoretical level, it contributes to sect-to-church-theory by highlighting the impression management of religious organizations that face pressure to adapt to their social environment, and (b) empirically, it explores middle class Pentecostalism in Argentina, examining assumptions about the development of middle class Pentecostalism in Latin America.

The article is structured as follows: the first section discusses sect-to-church theory, while the second section summarizes the two main academic perspectives on middle class Pentecostalism in Latin America. The third section describes the methods of the research and the fourth section portrays empirical results on middle class Pentecostalism in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The last section discusses the results against the background of insights on middle class Pentecostalism in Latin America and draws conclusions for sect-to-church theory. The article employs specific abbreviations for Pentecostal middle class congregations (MCCs) and middle class Pentecostals (MCPs): while “MCCs” refers to Pentecostal congregations that are composed by a majority of middle class members, “MCPs” stands for middle class individuals adhering to the Pentecostal movement.

SECT-TO-CHURCH TRANSITIONS

Sect-To-Church theory distinguishes between sects and churches as two types of religious organization. Predominant approaches define the main difference between these types by their level of tension towards the social environment (Dawson 2011; Iannaccone 1988; Johnson 1963; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Stark and Finke 2000). Stark and Finke (2000:143) describe this tension as the “degree of distinctiveness, separation and antagonism between the organization and the ‘outside’ world.” Following this classification, sects are religious organizations that evince high tension with their social environment, whereas churches are marked by low levels of tension.

High tension enables the creation of high rewards within the organization (Baker 2010; Iannaccone 1994) but also involves external costs for those belonging to the organization (cf. Stark and Finke 2000:144): religious membership becomes expensive in the outer, “secular” world, as members have to renounce secular pleasures and may be stigmatized for their membership, rendering social relationships with individuals outside the organization difficult. However, the costs vary according to the actors’ socio-economic positions in the secular

world, which leads to a class bias in sect membership: actors with relatively few secular opportunities have little to lose from sect membership, whereas individuals with a higher ability of generating secular rewards risk losing peers' recognition and being excluded from secular opportunities (Iannaccone 1988; Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000: 204). These claims are supported by research reporting that middle classes tend towards more theologically liberal and socially adapted religious groups than lower classes, avoiding sectarian movements, whereas lower classes are disproportionately present in conservative, less socially adapted, sectarian groups (Chaves 2004; Coreno 2002; Newport 1979; Park and Reimer 2002; Roof and Hadaway 1979; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Smith and Faris 2005; Waters, Heath and Watson 1995).¹

However, the profile of religious organizations is not invariable: they may become more sect or church-like, as they alter the level of tension between themselves and their social environment over time. Given the aforementioned class bias of sects, an important dynamic behind sect-to-church-transitions are changing socio-economic compositions (Iannaccone 1994; Niebuhr 1929; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Stark and Finke 2000).

As high tension involves a loss of secular opportunities for higher SES, improvements in sect members' SES are expected to involve the reduction of tension: sect-like organizations will smooth characteristics that create costs (e.g. stigma), adapting to their social environment, and become more church-like (Iannaccone 1994; Niebuhr 1929; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Stark and Finke 2000). When reducing the tension, religious organizations may, however, leave behind distinctive and potentially rewarding characteristics, negatively affecting members' satisfaction (Iannaccone 1994; Poloma 2005:59; Tracey 2012:92).

¹ The abovementioned theory and the empirical class bias indicate that sects tend to be less appealing for middle class individuals. Churches, by contrast, may not only be attractive for middle class individuals but may also attract lower class individuals.

Accordingly, religious organizations with a growing middle class membership are caught in a dilemma of adapting their religious profile to the social environment, reducing costs, but losing distinctive and potentially beneficial characteristics. Facing this dilemma, they may develop strategies to simultaneously adapt to the social environment and maintain sect characteristics, leading to ambivalent transition processes.

Contrasting the linear reading of sect-to-church theory, research indicates manifold ambivalences in these transitions. First, sect-to-church transitions are neither unidirectional nor irreversible processes (cf. Finke and Stark 2001; Stark and Finke 2000:259-276): the same religious organizations can move the sect-to-church spectrum up and down at different moments in time, relaxing and increasing tension. Moreover, transition processes are not necessarily all-encompassing: religious organizations may relax specific characteristics while at the same time maintaining other boundaries with the environment (cf. Samuel H. Reimer 2009). Iannaccone (1994:1203) has referred to this phenomenon as “selective adaptation.” Selective adaptation can serve to reduce the likely conflicts that occur between different poles within religious organizations during these change processes (cf. Stark and Finke 2000:205). Large religious organizations in particular are likely to involve diverse sub-groups that tend towards different positions along the sect-to-church spectrum (cf. Walters 2004), leading to struggles within the organizations.

This contribution shows that, to deal with the dilemma of adaptation, religious organizations selectively shield tension-related practices by transferring them to spaces and times that are less accessible for outsiders. Selective shielding points to the impression management of religious organizations (cf. Goffman 1959; Stolz 2011; Inbody 2015): the handling of information to create and maintain a certain image vis-à-vis others. This includes hiding information from relevant others which could spoil the intended image by shielding “inappropriate” characteristics from their glances, transferring these to less visible back regions (e.g. private sphere). Most research on impression management has focused on the

level of individuals and their direct interactions, whereas the impression management of organizations has received less attention (for an overview, see Bolino et al. 2008). Organizational impression management concerns the efforts of organizations to manage their image, bringing it in line with the social expectations of relevant others (cf. Elsbach et al. 1998). This includes internal as well as external audiences, leading to (a) internal impression management directed towards internal others (e.g. leaders vis-à-vis members) and (b) external impression management dealing with relevant outsiders and their expectations.

Studies on Pentecostalism have analyzed the internal impression management of Pentecostal congregations: social techniques—such as spiritual group training, music, testimonies, and suggestion—help to create strong emotional and spiritual experiences in Pentecostal congregations (cf. Stolz 2011; Inbody 2015). Similar to this research, Joosse (2012) highlights the importance of well-managed self-presentation towards internal member groups. Exploring the impression management of a charismatic leader of a new religious movement, he shows that the charismatic extraordinary self of the spiritual leader is constructed on the front region, whereas ordinary back region behavior in front of members can undermine the leader's extraordinary charismatic role.

In contrast to the aforementioned research, this study of middle class Pentecostalism shows how members of MCCs themselves engage in impression management and direct it towards external non-members. The external impression management aims to reduce levels of tension with the social environment while enabling at the same time the maintenance of tension-related practices: performing socially-adapted styles in the more publicly visible spaces, religious organizations can preserve tension-related practices in protected back regions. As such, selective shielding mitigates the need to abandon distinctive, tension-related characteristics.

TWO TALES OF MIDDLE CLASS PENTECOSTALISM IN LATIN AMERICA

Although defining Pentecostalism is challenging given its plurality, there are some attributes frequently associated with the movement (Anderson 2004; Robbins 2004). The most remarked upon and widespread feature of Pentecostalism is the emphasis on the Holy Spirit and its gifts, manifesting themselves, among others, in speaking in tongues, trance, and faith healing. Stressing the experience of the Spirit, the style of church services is usually highly emotional and expressive (Anderson 2004:11, 19; Parker 1996:156; Robbins 2004:121,125-126). Constituting an emotional and experience-focused type of Christianity that stresses “breaking with the past” (Meyer 2004) and offers spiritual solutions for earthly troubles, the movement has originally attracted the lowest social echelons in Latin America (Anderson 2004: 59,282; Burdick 1993:79,85; Hunt 2002; Jenkins 2007:73; Lehmann 1996:210-214; Martin 1990:53; 202; Martin 2002:1,20,78,81). However, given upward-social mobility among first and second generation Pentecostals and an increasing expansion of the movement, reaching diverse social sectors, Pentecostalism is climbing the social ladder and gaining ground in the middle classes (Berger 2009; Freston 1997; Martin 1995:107,112; Martin 2002:4,81,24,114; Schäfer and Tovar 2009:7; Stewart-Gambino and Wilson 1997:241; Woodberry 2008). Existing insights on the style of middle class Pentecostalism in Latin America are mostly limited to side-notes of research which investigates broader topics such as the political, economic, or social impact of Pentecostalism. Referring to different social and national contexts, they report that the local middle classes evolve a distinct style of Pentecostalism indicating a social class polarization within Pentecostalism (Schäfer 2009a:63).

MCCs as Adapting to their Social Environment

A characteristic frequently mentioned in relation to middle class Pentecostalism is a more open and pro-active attitude towards wider society. While traditional Pentecostalism, that

predominantly expanded in the lowest socio-economic classes, is characterized by a world-rejecting attitude, scholars of religion describe middle class Pentecostalism as more strongly orientated towards society (cf. Freston 1997:190-193,198-199; Garcia-Ruiz 2007; Hallum 2002:227,233-235; Schäfer 2005; Schäfer 2009b; Schäfer 2011).

Abstaining from draconic moral imperatives, researchers report that MCCs evolve a morality more open towards the modern world (Martin 1995:108; Martin 2006:152-153; Robbins 2004:121-122): its membership selectively participates in some of the pleasures of contemporary societies, such as modern clothing, television, alcohol, or soccer. An adaptation to the surrounding society also takes place in the very practice of Pentecostalism: Freston (1997:188) describes that elements which are “too Pentecostal” such as spiritual warfare do not match well with middle class sensibilities and are therefore avoided. Another observed feature of Middle Class Pentecostals (MCPs) is an affinity for more intellectual sermons (Gooren 2011).

The aforementioned tendencies point towards adaptation processes in MCCs that fit with sect-to-church theory (cf. Corten 1995:189-192,209-215): as they become less morally strict, abstain from strong spiritual practices, engage in wider society, and favor education, MCCs reduce the tension towards their social environment.

MCCs as Neo-Pentecostals

Another narrative of Latin American middle class Pentecostalism describes Neo-Pentecostalism as particularly attractive to middle classes (Delgado 2004:105-106; Ihrke-Buchroth 2013; Jaimes 2007; Garcia-Ruiz 2007; Mansilla 2008; Martin 2002:4; O'Neill 2010:10; Robbins 2004:121-122; Villamán 2002:510-511). However, the term “Neo-Pentecostalism” is used for diverse tendencies in the literature: prosperity gospel, spiritual warfare, employment of mass media technology, and pro-active attitudes towards the wider social environment in the form of political and social engagement (Aubrée 2010; Garcia-Ruiz 2007; Hollenweger 1976:33-45; Mansilla 2006; Schäfer 2009a; Stoll 1990:50). For this

reason, it is convenient to demarcate concrete characteristics that are prevalent in the use of the term “Neo-Pentecostalism.” The most prevalent characteristic of Neo-Pentecostalism is prosperity gospel. Also known as the “health and wealth gospel,” prosperity gospel propagates the belief that God blesses His faithful and obedient devotees with this-worldly benefits, particularly health and wealth (Hunt 2000; Mora 2008). Some scholars suppose middle classes to be more inclined towards prosperity gospel than their lower class counterparts (Bastian 2008:183; Hallum 2002; Ihrke-Buchroth 2013; Mansilla 2008): freed from the needs of everyday survival, they strive for further economic stability and desire to enjoy the fruits of market societies.

Nevertheless, the current knowledge about middle class Pentecostalism in Latin America is limited, as most of the insights are based on research about single congregations and are embedded in studies dealing with other topics.

METHODS

Middle class Pentecostalism is researched through an in-depth study of MCCs in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Argentina’s comparatively solid middle class was thought to facilitate the study of middle class Pentecostalism (Cárdenas, Kharas and Henao 2011; Germani 1981; Tevik 2006:23; Visacovsky 2008:11-12). Although a sociological standard definition of the middle class in Argentina does not exist, there are demographic characteristics generally attributed to the middle-middle and upper-middle class: above-average income and education, as well as white-collar job-occupations (Cueto and Luzzi 2008:61-62; SAIMO 2006; Svampa 2005; Tevik 2006; Torrado 2003).² In particular, professionals working, for instance, as

² Based on the above-mentioned contributions, this study defines the middle class in relation to other classes by its level of income, education, and typical occupations. For narrative interviews the study focused on professionals with at least finished secondary degrees and a minimum monthly household income of 820 Argentinean pesos per household member for

public administration employees, doctors, teachers, and managers are conceived of as the core of the middle class. As such, the following research focused on this group.

For the empirical investigation of middle class Pentecostalism, a total of 54 qualitative, in-depth interviews—ten Pentecostal pastors and 44 lay members—and ethnographic observations in twelve MCCs were conducted between the second half of 2009 and the first half of 2011. The research was split into meso and micro-level research. The meso-level (congregational level) placed a focus on medium-sized congregations with around 400 active members that are composed by a majority of middle class members. Twelve of these MCCs – the only identifiably medium-sized MCCs in Buenos Aires – were explored through ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews with ten Pentecostal pastors.³ Their socio-economic composition is the result of social upward mobility among existing members of the movement as well as affiliations of new members from the middle class.

the second quarter of 2009 (e.g. 3280 Arg. Pesos for a household with four members, the equivalent of 924 US Dollars, based on an exchange of 3.55 Arg. Pesos per USD).

³ Pentecostal congregations were defined as Protestant congregations that are not part of a denomination of historical Protestantism (e.g. Anglican, Lutheran, or Reformed Church) and emphasize the Holy Spirit and/or self-define themselves as Pentecostal. A combination of different indicators allowed for the estimation of the social composition of churches; for example: the location of the church, interviews with pastors, ethnographic and narrative interviews with members who were asked about the job occupation and educational background, observation of clothing and behavior, and cars in front to the church. The research focused on medium-sized churches because—being relatively successful in continuously attracting members—they are more likely to represent the style of a specific social class than small niche churches. Big and mega-churches, in contrast, show a more heterogeneous social composition, attracting their membership from various social classes.

On the micro-level (level of individual followers of Pentecostalism), 44 qualitative, in-depth interviews with Pentecostal lay members—including new and second generation members—were conducted in Spanish by the author of this study. Interviews usually lasted between two and three hours and took place—according to the preference of the interviewee—in the church, the home of the interviewee, or at the local university of Protestant theology, where the researcher was based. The interviews addressed the biography, social background, and religious preferences of the interviewee; they also included a specific video-section, where interviewees watched short video sequences of the religious practices of other Pentecostal churches. The objective of this method was to trigger judgments of taste regarding different styles of Pentecostalism. Qualitative data from the interviews was analyzed and compared using the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti.

MIDDLE CLASS PENTECOSTALISM IN ARGENTINA

Between eight (Mallimaci, Esquivel and Gimenez BEliveau 2015) and ten (Pew Research Center 2014) percent of the Argentinean population are reported to be Pentecostal. Although Pentecostalism is increasingly expanding into the Argentinean middle class, the movement still has a far higher occurrence in Argentina's lower class than in its middle class (Mallimaci 1999:86-87; Semán 2004:12-18; Wynarczyk, Semán and Majo 1995:7; Wynarczyk 2009a:53-55,170-171; Wynarczyk 2009b:64-65). For instance, studies in the Greater Buenos Aires area reveal above-average concentrations of Pentecostals among lower class populations and in lower class neighborhoods (Esquivel et al. 2001; Fidanza and Suárez 2016).

Its strong presence in the lower class has shaped public narratives about Pentecostalism: it tends to be perceived as a movement that mainly attracts the deprived social sectors and is frequently a subject of mockery (Semán 2004:12-18). Its perception is perhaps best illustrated by its representations in the media where it is often depicted together with other non-Catholic religious options, such as Afro-Brazilian religions, as a superstitious and fanatic religious

expression of the deprived lower class (Frigerio 1998; Frigerio 2002; Semán 2004:12-18; Semán 2006:217). Moreover, media coverage tends to portray the movement as alien to Argentinean society, which is, in contrast, represented as Catholic (Giménez Beliveau, Carbonelli and Mosqueira 2008). Nevertheless, public perception of the movement has improved slightly in the last decades (Frigerio 1998:446-450,453-455; Míguez 1998:120; Wynarczyk 2009a:179-208): its original portrayal as a serious threat to Argentinean society has been substituted by its representation as “crazy fanatics” acting as fodder for mockery, as reflected in the best-selling publications from national “sect experts” (e.g. Silleta 1986; Seselovsky 2005).

The public narratives have an impact on the movement’s social class composition. Being perceived as a lower class movement, Pentecostalism is regarded as an untypical religious option for the middle class. Furthermore, the style of “mass” Pentecostalism in Argentina—with its expressive and emotional practices—is strongly associated with lower class culture and religiosity (Parker 1996; Semán 2000) and stands in tension with Argentinean middle class culture, which is marked by the drawing of cultural distinctions from the alleged lower class culture. Representations of the middle class have evolved under the influence of European immigration and class struggles during the 19th and 20th centuries in Argentina (Adamovsky 2009; Cueto and Luzzi 2008; Guano 2004; Svampa 2005; Tevik 2006): these representations portray the middle class as European, modern, educated, ordered, self-controlled, rational, tidy, and civilized, in opposition to a superstitious, uneducated, emotional, untidy, and uncivilized lower class. By defining what is and is not considered middle class, these representations create behavioral standards in middle class circles, specifying what types of practices are and are not regarded as appropriate. These standards affect the practice of Pentecostalism among the middle class.

As Pentecostalism and its practices are associated with lower class culture, middle class actors tend to avoid Pentecostalism. Those affiliated with the movement risk facing tensions

with middle class peers. Accordingly, middle class interviewees reported that they had experienced tensions in their social environment due to their religious affiliation: they faced harassment and mockery at work, experienced conflicts with their relatives and friends, and were, in some cases, expelled from their previous social networks. The following paragraphs will show how MCPs deal with these tensions by developing a more socially adapted type of Pentecostalism. The description summarizes those characteristics that are widespread among the studied MCCs and tend to differ from other Pentecostal congregations.

Representing “Middle Class-ness”

MCCs are located in middle class neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. They have a well-administered and comfortable infrastructure, including different halls for courses, groups and other activities, and offices for pastors and secretaries. Moreover, their sophisticated administrative structure encompasses diverse organizational units, groups, and projects. Six of the studied churches contain a kindergarten, five a primary school, and three a secondary school, to which members can send their children. Furthermore, congregations offer a variety of courses and workshops to their members and sometimes collaborate closely with Bible institutes to develop their syllabus. The middle class interviewees interested in religious education, underpin this affinity for educational training. Moreover, they regard it as an essential requirement for their pastor to have a good educational training and criticize the Pentecostalism of the lower class neighborhoods for its lack of education.

Paralleling the demand for well-trained pastors, middle class preachers often indicate their educational skills by their way of preaching: they tend to use a controlled, thoughtful voice and articulate in a clearly spoken, white collar Spanish, different from the Argentinean accent prevalent among the lower class. By using abstract terminology (with terms in old Greek and Hebrew), extensive biblical references, and substantial background information, middle class preachers make their sermon appear more academic. Moreover, they establish their command over historical, scientific, and theological knowledge by referring to famous

scholars, particularly philosophers, or abstract theories. For instance, during a sermon in *Iglesia Del Libertador*, the preacher introduced the audience to James Fowler's faith stage theory (Fowler 1981) extensively describing each faith development stage and underpinning it with empirical examples.

MCC church services place a strong emphasis on the sermon. Sermons are generally lengthier and conducted in a more intellectual preaching style than in other Pentecostal churches. Frequently recurring motifs are personal and moral development, self-realization, and improving society. Pastors encourage adherents to assume a pro-active posture vis-à-vis their lives and society, modeling both along Christian values. In order to pro-actively shape their lives and social environment, educational and professional skills are regarded as essential: faithful Christians should prepare themselves for the challenges they face as Christians in modern society by educational training and moral self-enhancement. Stressing moral and social improvement instead of material improvement, prosperity gospel is not well received among middle class pastors and lay members: they voice harsh criticism, accusing it, for instance, of creating false expectations and selling fast "McDonald's-like"-solutions to impoverished individuals (Interview MCP 18). Consequently, prosperity gospel remains widely absent in middle class church services.

Nevertheless, in contrast to traditional, inward-oriented Pentecostalism, MCCs do not withdraw from society but seek integration and recognition within their social environment. Thus, specific dress codes that would distinguish members from non-members are absent: followers arrive in casual, but tidy leisure clothes to middle class church services, wearing, for instance, shorts, and polo shirts and even close fitting dresses. Likewise the general moral code is more open towards society than in traditional, morally strict Pentecostalism. Although MCCs still mark some differences vis-à-vis the Argentinean society by prohibiting, for instance, tobacco-consumption and pre-marital sex, they allow their followers to enjoy worldly distractions such as cinema, soccer, and sometimes alcohol. In this way, MCCs

reduce potential tensions with the surrounding society and enable members to engage more smoothly within their secular environment (Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000). Additionally, members are not only allowed, but even urged to assume an active stake in society and to “make history,” as a preacher in a church service of the MCC *Assembly of Christ* declares. An important way of impacting the society at large is charity work. MCCs offer, for instance, legal counseling to lower class families, launch meal programs in lower class neighborhoods, and send clothes and school equipment to poorer provinces in the north of Argentina.

Altogether, MCCs relationship towards society is marked by efforts to reduce – but not fully dissolve – the existing boundaries in opposition to the surrounding social environment. These efforts are specifically directed towards the middle class environment. MCCs seek to disengage from the stigmatized imaginary of Pentecostalism as untidy and disordered slum churches governed by uneducated slum-dwellers. When complaining about his own lower class church, one MCP outlines the tension to what he describes as the European middle class culture, as follows:

“(...) it so happens that we come from European roots, from European culture, and this is a church that is really for slum people, (...) so there are things that shock us sometimes, behaviors that – perhaps the slum people are very disorganized, they have a very chaotic way of being, that we don’t like, and when you belong to a community like that, it’s like they impose it.” (Interview MCP 23)

MCCs seek to overcome the tension between “middle class culture” and Pentecostalism. For this purpose, they parade their middle class-ness by attributing middle class markers to their congregations (e.g. professional organization, educational training).

Selective Shielding of Socially Unacceptable Practices

The general atmosphere of MCC church services is calmer, more sober, and less expressive than in other Pentecostal churches. Although MCPs believe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, practices that involve the Holy Spirit such as faith healing and glossolalia are largely absent in

church services. Accordingly, interviewees describe their own style, in comparison to the style of other Pentecostals, as calm. They dislike church services with a loud and emotional atmosphere and perceive speaking in tongues as well as other spiritual manifestations during the church service as disturbing. Spiritual practices such as exorcisms and faith healing are described as a circus and chaotic. One MCP watching a video sequence of an exorcism in a Pentecostal church utters:

“It annoys me. Because if someone from outside comes in, he will say “they are mad” and he is right.” (Interview MCP 13)

The preference for a calmer style of Pentecostalism parallels the desire to avoid any embarrassment vis-à-vis non-Pentecostal class peers. Against the background of potential visits from non-Pentecostal class peers, the church services assume the quality of a public sphere—a front region—which must be carefully managed. MCPs feel a need to socially adapt the performance of their religion in this sphere. As a consequence, they do not want fellow church members or their pastors to shout, speak loudly in tongues, dance in the Spirit or carry out exorcisms. In the case of spiritual manifestations, middle class adherents prefer to withdraw the manifesting individuals from the church service, hiding them away from the glances of peers. Pastors of MCCs act as directors of the “play,” seeking to limit the manifestations of the Holy Spirit and withdrawing participants from the church service, in the case of potentially disturbing manifestations. Thus, one pastor states that if participants speak in tongues, he would take them aside and ask them to abstain from glossolalia (Interview Pastor 7).

Nevertheless, pastors and adherents do not fully neglect practices involving the Holy Spirit: although they state their importance, they nevertheless assign a different social space to these practices. Thus, a pastor explains that potentially disruptive practices are conducted outside the church service in order to maintain “a certain image” and avoid the typical Pentecostal “transgressions”.

“If we conduct religious practices where we think people may fall down or manifest the Spirit in some way, we do it after the service, not during the service. This is to prevent projecting a certain image to people who are not part of the congregation. (...) In Pentecostal churches, people yell, there are very dramatic expressions of the Spirit. But these transgressions, so to speak, wouldn’t occur in our church.” (Interview Pastor 2)

Intimate contexts that are shielded from outsiders—small groups, member retreats, private locations—are considered more suitable for these practices. They constitute back regions in which inappropriate Pentecostal practices—such as practices of faith healing, exorcisms and speaking loudly in tongues—can be practiced in isolation from the glances non-Pentecostal class peers. MCPs selectively shield tension-related elements of Pentecostal religiosity from the social environment by transferring them to the private sphere. Thus, several middle class interviewees mentioned that they speak loudly in tongues at home while refraining to do so in church services.

“(...) speaking in tongues (...) is more of a personal thing with God than something to display in public. Yes, I believe that people can speak in tongues when you are worshipping, when you are in intimate prayer with God, that the Spirit can move you to say different things. But that is something between you and God, not a circus act. (...) I like to talk to God when I’m in the shower, when I’m drinking mate, when I get angry.” (Interview MCP 17)

Interestingly, the studied MCC that conducts the most expressive church services engages doormen to control the incoming audience. The doormen question unknown newcomers at the entrance and send them to an interview at one of the pastors’ offices before granting them access to the church service. In this way, this MCC converts the church service, which in other Pentecostal churches is easily accessible, into a protective niche, allowing for less socially adapted practices. Accordingly, the banning of tension-related practices depends on the extent to which the religious performance is accessible for outsiders: the lower the probability of non-Pentecostal peers witnessing the religious practices, the higher the freedom of drifting towards the sect spectrum and conducting practices that might be experienced as

inappropriate by outsiders. The examples indicate that “adaptation”—i.e. the reduction of tension towards the social environment—consists in managing the congregation’s impression towards relevant outsiders: MCCs design socially acceptable representations of Pentecostalism for non-Pentecostal middle class audiences while shielding other tension-related practices from the glances of these audiences.

In sum, MCCs moderate the emotionality and expressivity of the church service and withdraw socially inappropriate, uncontrolled practices (e.g. exorcisms, faith healing, speaking in tongues) from it, while attributing order, physical, and emotional self-control as markers of middle class culture to it. While the religious practice on the front region conforms to the social pressure for adaptation, the less socially adapted, sect-like characteristics continue to shape the religious practice in the back region, which is shielded from the glances of non-Pentecostals. In this way, selective shielding of tension-related practices allows for simultaneous adaptation of the MCCs’ visible practice, reducing the costs for members, and preserving distinctive, but less adapted, practices.

This impression management concerns in particular the immediate social environment of MCCs. Selective shielding of “inappropriate” practices enables MCPs to invite their middle class peers to church services. Staging an acceptable religious practice can improve acceptance among those invited. For instance, in a church service following a wedding in an MCC, the non-Pentecostal father of the bride expressed the family’s gratitude to the congregation and the positive surprise of non-Pentecostal family members and friends at the nice celebration in the church. It appeared that the non-Pentecostal visitors had come to the Pentecostal congregation with negative expectations and were astonished to find an “acceptable” religious community that conducts its faith in an appropriate way. Creating this image vis-à-vis the non-Pentecostal social environment was only possible through selective shielding: any practice that could disturb the non-Pentecostal visitors was banned from the wedding. As the impression management of MCCs mostly involves the immediate social

environment, it hardly affects public representations of Pentecostalism in Argentina and therefore is not able to facilitate a massive Pentecostal expansion among Argentina's middle class. Nevertheless, pastors report slight increases in membership over time, mostly based on new affiliations coming from the congregations' middle class networks.

DISCUSSION: FROM SECT TO CHURCH?

The study of Argentinean MCCs reveals social adaptation processes and contradicts assumptions about the Neo-Pentecostal tendency of middle classes in Latin America. Moreover, the study shows that adaptation – i.e. the reduction of tension towards the social environment – does not necessarily imply the abandoning of tension-related practices. Alternatively, religious organizations can manage the congregation's impression towards outsiders by, for instance, selectively shielding tension-related practices from their glances.

Research on middle class Pentecostalism in Latin America is fragmented with divergent assumptions regarding its shape. While the insights from this study underpin claims supposing an ongoing adaptation among MCCs in Latin America (Corten 1995:189-192,209-215; Schäfer 2009a:62,67-72; Schäfer 2010:103), the often suggested tendency of MCPs towards Neo-Pentecostalism is not corroborated (Delgado 2004: 105-106; Jaimes 2007; Garcia-Ruiz 2007; Mansilla 2008; Martin 2002:4; O'Neill 2010:10; Robbins 2004:121-122; Villamán 2002:510-511). Instead of cultivating characteristics often attributed to Neo-Pentecostalism, such as prosperity gospel and spiritual warfare, the studied Argentinean middle class pastors and lay members reject these elements and lean towards a less expressive, socially adapted form of Pentecostalism. Empirical insights from Brazil and Chile indicate similar tendencies (Martin 1995; Martin 2006; Freston 1997; Gooren 2011; Robbins 2004:121-122). In the light of these insights, equating Latin American middle class Pentecostalism with Neo-Pentecostalism seems inaccurate. Nevertheless, research from Central America indicates that local MCCs are inclined towards prosperity gospel (Anderson

2004:76-77; Delgado 2004; Garcia-Ruiz 2004; Hallum 2002:227; O'Neill 2010:10; Schäfer 2005; Schäfer 2009a:49). The diverging narratives on Central American and Southern American middle class Pentecostalism suggest that the style of Pentecostalism in Latin America not only varies along the adherents' SES but also depends on the geographical context. This raises the question of how the geographical differences in Latin American middle class Pentecostalism can be explained within the context of sect-to-church theory.

Relating the regional variations in middle class Pentecostalism to differences in the regional cultures of Latin America's Southern Cone and Central America offers a potential explanation. While adaptation processes constitute a general denominator of middle class Pentecostalism⁴, the particular outcomes of these processes are likely to depend on the specific social environment in which MCCs are embedded. Research showing that religious organizations' tension with the social environment depends on the given regional culture underpins this assumption (Wellman and Corcoran 2013): what features of religion are experienced as creating tension depends on the specific regional social environment in which the organization is embedded. Consequently, the strategies to reduce the tension and the religious styles that result from the adaptation process will also differ according to the regional culture. However, the tension may not only depend on the regional environment, but also on the culture of the specific peer group to which the religious organization primarily relates in this regional environment. The studied MCCs exhibit middle class markers, while shielding spiritual practices that will be perceived as "mad" (Interview MCP 13) by non-Pentecostal middle class peers. Thus, differences in regional middle class cultures, resulting in

⁴ Adaptation processes among MCCs are reported by scholars working on Central America (Schäfer 2009a:62,67-72; Schäfer 2010:103) as well as by research on Pentecostalism in Asia (Luca 2000:535), Africa (Hasu 2012; Heuser 2013:166; Martin 2002:152, Meyer 2007:13; Ukah 2005:261-262), and the US (Poloma and Green 2010).

divergent tensions and adaptations processes, may explain the discrepancies in Southern and Central American middle class Pentecostalism: as such, regional differences in values regarding the accumulation and exposure of wealth among middle classes (cf. Lamont 1992) might have an impact on the appeal of prosperity gospel among MCPs in these two regions.

Processes of adaptation to the surrounding culture are crucial for the success of churches, as Marti (2008) points out in his study of Hollywood's Oasis Christian Center. The adaptation process depends on the specific life circumstances of members outside their congregations. Aside from class-related demands, these can concern the professional challenges of members, as in the case of the Oasis Christian Center which adapts to the occupational environment of the creative class related to Hollywood's entertainment industry. Similar to the Argentinean MCCs, this church manages tension via creative adaptation processes specific to the social environment in which its members move. However, in contrast to the MCCs, it develops a prosperity-oriented faith which places an emphasis on the professional challenges of its members. Another difference concerns the negotiation of tension: Argentinean MCCs indicate that managing tension sometimes involves creative strategies to maintain and shield tension-related practices. This has consequences for the development of (middle class) Pentecostalism.

Following the narrative of sect-to-church transitions, large sections of the Pentecostal movement may eventually smooth their religious practice and adapt to their social environment if Pentecostalism increasingly turns into a middle class movement. In the case of long-run adaptation processes Pentecostalism may evolve analogously to Methodism, as David Martin (2002) has suggested, becoming a barely distinguishable, socially-acceptable, type of Protestantism.

However, aside from the apparently ubiquitous adaptation processes, the study of Argentinean MCCs reveals selective shielding processes. Selective shielding allows for the withdrawal of tension without abandoning distinctive practices, by relegating the continued

practice of glossolalia and faith healing to hidden back regions. Away from the gaze of non-Pentecostal peers, back regions release middle class Pentecostals from social class pressure and allow for the conducting of less socially adapted practices. These tendencies cast doubt on the aforementioned scenario: MCCs are not fully adapting to their social environment, as they preserve specific Pentecostal practices in protective niches.

According to sect-to-church theory, sects that improve their socio-economic status (SES) will reduce the tension between the organization and its social environment to decrease the costs of group membership. Organizations may selectively adapt, changing specific tension-related characteristics, while maintaining others, as described by Iannaccone (Iannaccone 1994: 1203). This study indicates that religious organizations not only selectively choose what characteristics they adapt, but also how they self-represent “adaptation” by showing specific characteristics and hiding others away. Thereby, it highlights the use of impression management towards actors outside of the given religious organization. Research on Pentecostalism has analyzed the internal impression management of Pentecostal congregations (cf. Inbody 2015; Stolz 2011). By contrast, this study reveals the external impression management of Pentecostal congregations: being afraid of non-Pentecostal peers becoming aware of their “ordinary” Pentecostal practices, MCPs create a front region directed to the movement’s relevant outsiders.

External impression management allows the simultaneous reduction of tension and preservation of tension-related practices in back regions. Consequently, adaptation—i.e. the reduction of tension towards the social environment—does not necessarily imply the abandoning of tension-related practices, but consists in managing the impression that outsiders may get of the given religious organization, as religious actors selectively show and hide particular elements of their religious practice. The showing and hiding depends on the perceived presence of outsiders at the given moment: the higher the likelihood of relevant outsiders witnessing the religious practice, the more likely a reduction of tension and the more

the religious practice tends towards the church spectrum. However, the lower the extent to which outsiders can gain access to the religious practice, the higher the degrees of freedom to drift towards the sect spectrum. As a result, “sect” and “church” may simultaneously co-exist within the same religious organization, while being selectively performed in specific spaces and times.

This, however, raises the question of how to classify religious organizations that reduce the tension on the front region, but, on the back region, maintain high levels of distinctiveness from their social environment. Although classifying religious organizations along a one-dimensional axis (i.e. level of tension) facilitates clear sect–church typologies (cf. Dawson 2011:533,536-541), it creates problems when religious organizations cannot be coherently attributed along this one-dimensional axis. A more dynamic perspective may help to solve the aforementioned problem: instead of perceiving religious organizations as being located at a fixed point on the sect-to-church axis, religious organizations may, in the short run, move relatively flexibly between different points on the axis by adapting their performances depending on the extent to which they are potentially visible to relevant outsiders at the given moment in time. In particular, religious organizations struggling with the above-mentioned dilemma of adaptation may strategically adjust their performances: facing pressure to reduce tension, as their members experience excessive costs outside the organization, while at the same time standing by their distinctive practices, these organizations are likely to evolve strategies enabling them to switch between sect and church-like religious practices.

To further explore whether and in what way religious organizations engage in impression management and evolve strategies to switch between sect- and church-like religious practices, more research is needed. In particular, comparative in-depth research on middle class Pentecostalism in different world regions could yield intriguing results about the selective shielding strategies of MCCs and their embeddedness in regional middle class cultures.

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