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PENTECOSTALISM AND POLITICS IN ARGENTINA 1983-1995

Why are Pentecostals Politically Ambiguous?¹

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During the present century Protestantism, especially Pentecostal ministries, expanded in Latin America. The expansion did not embrace the whole sub-continent in just one stroke. It was, rather, a slow process that began between the 1930s and 1960s in Brazil, Chile and parts of Central America, continued during the 1970s and 1980s in Colombia, Peru, Guatemala, Nicaragua and reached late bloomers such as Argentina and Uruguay during the second half of the 1980s (Dodson, 1997:28). Contrary to what many initially assumed, growth did not respond to the combined strategy of USA based giant denominations and CIA foreign policies. Instead, it was the task of 'small people': Pentecostal growth was based on local churches and leaders, and micro --person to person-- processes of communication and diffusion (Stewart-Gambino and Wilson, 1997:230).

Confronted with this wave of Pentecostal growth researchers have stubbornly asked the same question: what are the possible effects of this expansion in Latin American politics? From the beginning, responses have been conflictive. The conflict began in the late sixties when Willems (1968) and d'Epinay (1969) pioneered the debate over the possible political influences of Pentecostalism. Willems sustained that Pentecostalism promoted, in mid-century Brazil and Chile, democratic and horizontal social relations. These types of relations contrasted with the traditional vertical patronage power structures of the two Latin American countries, implying a kind of symbolic protest against the *status quo*. Assuming a functionalist standpoint, Willems concluded that in this way Pentecostalism contributed to the 'modernisation' of Brazil and Chile. Contrastingly, d'Epinay asserted that, due to the kind of apoliticism it proposed Pentecostalism bolstered the traditional patriarchal and authoritarian power structure of the *Hacienda*. Thus, d'Epinay contended, Pentecostalism was a traditional force not a modernising influence. D'Epinay's study also pioneered the debate over the effects of Pentecostalism in the political consciousness of the working classes. This was a topic that soon took centre-stage in the debates over Pentecostalism's political influences.

Subsequent work has taken up the same issues originally suggested by Willems and d'Epinay and thus may be grouped according to how they treat the problem of modernisation or the issue of class consciousness. In relation to the former, there is a body of authors, such as Martin (1990) or Stoll (1990) that stress the elements of rationality, thriftiness, respect for civil rights that, as part of the general Protestant heritage, are also present in Pentecostal doctrine and practice. Consequently, they perceive in Pentecostalism a modernising and democratic force that may help Latin Americans to get rid of corporatist practices and irrational behaviour such as machismo, alcoholism, etc. Contrastingly, d'Epinay (1968), Hoffnagel (1980) and Bastian (1992, 1993), see in Pentecostal hierarchical relations between pastors and laity and in their spiritual effervescence a traditional and

authoritarian force reinstalling in a changing Latin America traditional corporatist and irrational practices.

There have also been contrasting positions in relation to the issue of class consciousness. Authors such as Rolim (1980, 1985), Assman (1987) and Prandi (1992) have stressed Pentecostal otherworldliness. Hence, they interpret the movement as an alienating force that assigns spiritual causes to social problems, thus promoting the search for solutions in the spiritual world instead of fostering social struggle. In opposition, Novaes (1980), Burdick (1993), Ossa (1991) claim that Pentecostalism does not hinder people's involvement in social struggle; they show how different elements of Pentecostal doctrine are occasionally used by its adherents to support their fights for social justice. According to this position, Pentecostalism may not be interpreted easily as an alienating movement.

Another series of Pentecostal studies has held what may be called the 'paradoxical behaviour' hypothesis. These authors' position is simply that Pentecostalism is politically ambiguous. There are many and contrasting tendencies within Pentecostalism, depending on the context and the type of Pentecostalism it may bolster more progressive or conservative politics. Therefore, there is not just one political essence in Pentecostalism, but many versions that draw inspiration from its basic tenets. Ireland (1991, 1993) and Freston (1992, 1993) have reported these ambiguous tendencies for the Brazilian case, Cleary and Sepulveda (1997:114) for the Chilean, and some understand paradox to be a characteristic of Latin American Pentecostalism generally (Droogers, 1991).

Although these authors have been consistent in showing the ambiguous roles played by Pentecostals, they generally do not provide a systematic frame to interpret this ambiguity. In my view, it is possible to explain Pentecostal political ambiguity by noting five factors that influence their behaviour: (i) Pentecostals' main aim and motivation is evangelisation, thus politics is subsidiary to most Pentecostals; (ii) another strong motivation for Pentecostal leaders is advancement in the church's institutional structure; (iii) because of this, Pentecostal's relationship to politics is instrumental and pragmatic (Cleary 1997) --Pentecostals enter politics when they sense that purposes of kinds (i) and (ii) obtain by doing it; (iv) Pentecostal followers, and to a lesser extent leaders, have secular political identities and ideologies (political perspectives that were constituted previously to conversion or recognise other sources besides Pentecostal doctrine) that influence their behaviour; (v) although certain elements are central --as evangelisation-- Pentecostal doctrine is malleable and subject to *ad hoc* interpretation --thus, many different political ideologies and practices may be justified by it. What explains the political behaviour of Pentecostals in different contexts is the particular combination of, at least, some of these five factors. Thus, the argument in this paper, which focuses on the politics of Argentine Pentecostalism, is twofold: first, adding new evidence to the 'paradoxical behaviour' hypothesis, it shows the different and contrasting political roles played by Argentine Pentecostals; second, it also shows how Pentecostal political ambiguity may be explained by referring to these five factors.

Pentecostalism and Politics at the National Level²

Pentecostalism started to have a certain impact on Argentine politics at the beginning of the nineties. This because it was only after 1985 that, reaching a 10 per cent of the population, Pentecostalism became a visible and relatively strong actor in Argentine society³. The impact of Pentecostalism in politics occurred at two levels: at the national level where Pentecostals tried to create an evangelical party and also lobbied in favour of religious freedom; and at a more local --neighbourhood-- level where Pentecostals occasionally played relevant roles in relation to the

patronage networks of traditional political parties. The five factors mentioned in the introduction may help to clarify Pentecostal political behaviour at both levels. We will start with national level politics.

To comprehend the political repercussions of Pentecostalism it is necessary to understand the context in which Pentecostal political actions took place. During the eighties Argentina re-entered democracy. This implied growing political freedom, including an increase in religious liberty. This increase occurred in two ways: first, prohibitions to proselytise, which specifically affected non-Catholic religious groups, were removed; second, people acquired a more developed consciousness of the importance of civil rights --especially freedom of speech and thought-- (Cheresky, 1992) and thus felt more free to enter dissident religious minorities as Pentecostals. However, the movement towards an increasing religious freedom was not simple. The public exhibition of formerly marginal religious minorities produced a negative reaction of Catholic and other social sectors --this reaction was especially perceivable in the media and in a 'law of cults' restricting religious freedom promoted by certain senators and deputies connected to the Catholic Church (Frigerio 1993). The former reaction was particularly strong during the first presidency of president Menem (1989-1995)⁴ --and particularly felt during the constitutional reform of 1994 and in the debates held in the National Congress over the 'law of cults' since 1989. These initiatives countering religious liberties were resisted by Protestants in general and Pentecostals in particular⁵, showing one of the motivations they had to enter politics.

Another element that influenced the situation of Argentine Pentecostalism was the development of the local party structures and political culture soon after the return to democracy. During the initial democratic years people eagerly participated in politics. But, as in Mitchel's Iron Law of Bureaucracy, the two dominating Argentine parties, the Peronist Party (also called *Justicialista*) and the *Unión Cívica Radical* (UCR), soon developed bureaucratic structures that privileged positions in the party or state --government-- power structure over representation. They thus turned into what are known commonly as 'political machines' or 'catch all parties'. This kind of party structure promotes political patronage and the use of state resources to favour political leaders and brokers. In the Argentine case this self-centred political culture stimulated corruption of government functionaries. This became particularly clear in the presidency of Menem. As shown below, the contrast between the context of extortion created by these political practices and the quotidian support provided by Pentecostal congregations worked in favour of local participation in the latter. The perception that people's discontent with politics favoured Pentecostal initiatives also gave the idea to some leaders that this could be capitalised by creating an Evangelical political party, for complex reasons elucidated below the initiative failed.

The Evangelical Party Experience

The first attempt to create an Evangelical party in Argentina occurred in 1991 and was undertaken by an ecumenical group --mainly Baptists, Pentecostals and Plymouth Brethren. The initial group was formed by second rank leaders and did not comprise any of the more outstanding Pentecostal pastors, although there was an attempt to include pastor Gimenez⁶ due to his popularity outside Pentecostal circles. This group had two basic motivations. One was that Pentecostal leaders wanted to occupy spaces in the state power structure because they sensed this would foster evangelisation. They planned to use their positions in the state structure to provide resources to their churches. This first kind of motive was widely divulged in services and evangelical meetings. Another motivation was that the second rank leaders saw a possibility to enhance their positions by using the Pentecostal suffrage to promote themselves to the state's power structure and in that way

become more relevant in Evangelical circles as well⁷. This second kind of motivation became evident in the fierce struggles leaders had to occupy top positions in the electoral lists. These conflicts, concurrently with other causes, drove the party to the point of dissolution. Thus, we can see in these issues how, at least some, of the five factors mentioned above intervene in Pentecostal political behaviour. The initial drive to create the party responded to aims of kind (i) --evangelisation-- and (ii) --leaders' search for promotion. Factor (iii) is present in that the leaders' involvement in politics had an instrumental character since they entered politics because factors (i) and (ii) could be obtained by doing it. Factors (iv) --influence of secular ideologies-- and (v) --malleability of doctrine-- have also intervened in the processes that explains the rise and decline of the Evangelical political party. This may be seen in what follows.

Factor (v) is perceivable when analysing one of the main problems the leaders had to face when promoting their parties inside and outside Pentecostal circles. This was to justify in front of Pentecostal followers and the secular public why they were entering the political terrain. Pentecostals in Argentina had always followed the perception that politics were a 'thing of the world' --the human world of sin-- in which they should not get involved. In order to enter politics Pentecostals had to trespass this old doctrinal prohibition. Given the malleability of Pentecostal doctrine they soon found ways to justify involvement. The leaders claimed that fostering evangelisation was more important than respecting the commandment of not engaging in the activities of the world. They also argued that they would not become 'of the world' by entering politics since they did not plan to accept the corrupt practices of traditional politicians. In opposition, they would carry the evangelical message to them, calling politicians to accept God and become more honest. Using the Evangelical monthly *El Puente*, (along with secular media) and Evangelical meetings the leaders rationalised these motives in the following way: The main purpose of the party was to defend the Evangelical people from the possibly discriminatory laws that had been presented to the Congress and that could restrict their evangelising capacities. Also, positions in the state structure could be eventually used to promote evangelisation. Another official motive was that Evangelical politicians could help to promote a more clean, transparent and less corrupt political practice; in that way contributing to the well-being of the Argentine people in general. The latter kind of motive was highlighted when advertising the political party and candidates in the secular media, the former motivation was stressed in Evangelical media and meetings.

In spite of all these efforts, the 1991 initiatives to create the party failed; it was only in 1993 that this group of Evangelicals were able to present candidates in national elections. This first initiative was not successful, the party received only 80.000 votes from the 6.000.000 cast in that opportunity. The amount was not even enough to position one of its candidates in office. The constitutional reform of 1994 represented the second time that the party had candidates stand in national elections. Again, they received very poor electoral support. Contrasting with the experiences of Peru, Brazil and Central America⁸ it seems that in Argentina 'brothers don't vote for brothers'(cf. Freston, 1993). According to interviews and also to the analysis made by Pentecostal leaders themselves, the main intervening factor was of type (iv) --secular political identities inclined people not to support the Pentecostal candidates. These secular political identities were of two sorts: (a) some people had previously acquired political identities, most of them Peronists⁹, which they were not willing to give up in spite of their conversion; (b) others had a long established perception that politics are dirty. As shown afterwards, this view was already strong in the secular political culture of the popular sectors. Because of these two elements, people were very reluctant to support in elections the candidates of the Evangelical party in spite of the promotion given in services, media and meetings¹⁰.

After the two disappointing electoral experiences, schisms began in the Evangelical party. In the reasons explaining these ruptures factors of type (ii) and (iv) are present. The main conflict line stemmed from the struggle to occupy leading positions in the party, which coupled with ideological differences between party members. The latter had to do more with secular political ideologies than with contrasting Evangelical identities. A group of party leaders were former policemen of the state of Buenos Aires who had participated in the repressive task forces during the right-wing dictatorship of 1976-83 and converted to Pentecostalism afterwards. According to the opposing group within the party, they had not really repented from the role played in the violent years, and during harsh discussions had remembered the 'good old times' in a humorous, but also threatening tone. Given the lack of electoral success, this group favoured the initiative of making an alliance with the Justicialista party, especially a right wing sector related to the governor of the state of Buenos Aires. Because this group had the strongest contacts with the Justicialistas, it was them who would get the leading positions in the electoral lists in case the alliance was finally carried through.

The other sector favoured a different strategy. Although they had not had strong political commitments, they were sensitive to a blurred progressive ideology and did not tolerate the kind of authoritarianism of the other sector. Thus, profiting from their contacts with a few well-connected Protestant pastors (who had participated in the constitutional reform, but were not members of the group) they joined a more progressive centre-left alliance (*Frente del País Solidario* --Frepasso). The fluent contact with these pastors granted them --or so they thought-- access to the leading positions in the electoral lists. So, besides ideological differences, there was also a struggle for the better positions in the electoral lists between the groups.

Both groups failed in their purposes. The lack of effective electoral support, and the scarce knowledge and preparation for public functions put these groups in a weak negotiating position. Thus, neither the Frepasso nor the right wing Justicialista sector paid attention to the initiatives undertaken by these groups, giving them only minor roles and no positions in party or state structure to its members. In this way the basic motivation of the Pentecostal leaders (fostering evangelisation and self-promotion) have waned, and the initiative to create an Evangelical party seems to have been put to rest for now.

Thus, in these events the influence of some of the five factors mentioned above may be perceived. The basic motivation of the leaders was to enhance their institutional positions by entering politics. This may be seen in that they favoured the initiative that granted them the better positions in the electoral lists. Thus, when acceding to these positions became impossible their interests in politics waned. It is also perceivable here how the leaders' secular political ideologies also influenced the kind of alliance they favoured: more authoritarian leaders favoured a right wing alliance and more progressive leaders a centre-left one. Thus, we may conclude that in this case the interaction of two of the five factors --(ii) leaders' search for institutional power and (iii) secular political ideologies-- explain the political behaviour of these Pentecostals.

Summarising, in the precedent issues we may see how the five factors mentioned in the introduction are present. The basic motivations of the leaders to create the party are of kinds (i) and (ii): they want to foster evangelisation and to promote themselves to more powerful institutional positions. In this we may see how factor (iii) is present, these leaders have an instrumental relationship to politics in that they remain interested as long as factors of kinds (i) and (ii) may be achieved through political involvement; when this is no longer the case they lose interest --which partly explains why the initiative to create the party waned. When looking at why the party had scarce electoral support, we perceive the presence of factor (iv): people have secular political ideologies that intervene in their behaviour --in this case these ideologies did not incline the

Pentecostal constituency to support the Evangelical party. Also, factors of type (ii) and (iv) help to explain the division occurred within the party: the struggle for positions in the electoral lists and the contrasting secular ideologies of the leaders explains the schism in the party. Factor (v) --the malleability of doctrine-- is widely present in that different positions --such as supporting or countering political involvement, or supporting right-wing or left wing politics-- may all be sustained by invoking the basic tenets of Pentecostalism.

Struggles for Religious Freedom

The fact that the initiative to create a party failed, should not make us conclude that Pentecostals have not played any political role in Argentina. On the contrary, they have played a certain role; especially in what concerns the issue of religious liberties. Protestants, among them Pentecostals, have strongly opposed a law of cults restricting religious freedom. A law that has been promoted by certain Catholic sectors and has circled the Congress' chambers since 1989 without reaching a final approval. This due, in part, to Protestant lobbying and street demonstrations (Marostica 1994). Also, these lobbying and demonstrations have contributed to the derogation --during the constitutional reform of 1994-- of an article demanding the president to be a Catholic¹¹.

My observation of the meetings where pastors and leaders planned these actions show that there has been a certain heterogeneity in the motivations that the different denominations had. Historical Churches defended religious liberty as a value in itself. Pentecostals did not really defend the democratic principle of religious liberties. They were not comfortable with the idea that this would allow other religious groups, which they consider evil (ie. Afro-Brazilian religions and *curanderas*-faith healers), to proselytise freely --some even proposed that religious freedom should be restricted to Christian groups. In spite of these doctrinal obstacles a majority concluded that it was better to support complete religious freedom. This because they sensed that going against it could backfire and some of their own groups be affected in their evangelising capacities by the new legal restrictions. Thus, they proceeded pragmatically and concluded that it was better to disregard pure doctrine and not run the risk of being affected by legal limitations. Again, given the malleability of Pentecostal doctrine, they found ways to justify their position. They claimed that, according to the scriptures, God was mighty and that they would be able to overcome the evil forces of Umbanda and Curanderismo in the new free context.

As in previous cases, a combination of the five factors may help us to understand these issues. Factor (i) is present in that the main motivation in the leader's actions was to enhance --or at least avoid restrictions to-- their churches' evangelising capacities. This is what initially prompted them to engage in lobbying and to organise street demonstrations against the law of cults. Thus in this case, as in the previous one, Pentecostals establish an instrumental relationship towards politics by pursuing the enhancement of evangelisation through political action --hence factor (iii) is involved. This case also makes evident how factor (v), the malleability of doctrine, allows them to pragmatically pursue their main aims always finding an *ad hoc* doctrinal interpretation that justifies their actions. Thus, three elements interact here: the paramount character of evangelisation, pragmatism and the malleability of doctrine. It is, thus, the interaction of these three factors what explains the behaviour of Pentecostals in this case.

We have now examined the political behaviour of Protestants and Pentecostals at a National level; if we concluded here the picture would be incomplete. Given the fact that Pentecostalism is a grassroots religion it is impossible to completely understand it without exploring more local contexts. To comprehend the political implications of local Pentecostal action at the neighbourhood

level it becomes fundamental to understand how traditional political parties behave at local levels. This behaviour transforms into political issues what normally would only be administrative procedures. The patronage networks of dominating parties tend to subordinate the implementation of social policies of assistance and development to the parties' interest. Because of this, inhabitants acting independently from political patronage structures become frustrated. Their demands receive no attention even when they strictly meet legal and administrative requirements. In this context Pentecostal congregations sometimes act as a channel through which the demands of these independent people are expressed and their necessities satisfied. This, eventually, gives to Pentecostal churches a political dimension which they usually don't seek and many times are not aware of. As shown at the end of the next section this political behaviour may also be clarified by the five factors model used before.

Pentecostalism and Politics at Local Levels

We are now about to explore the political behaviour of a Pentecostal church in Villa Eulalia¹². Villa Eulalia is a popular neighbourhood located in the second urbanisation belt of Buenos Aires city. The neighbourhood inhabitants belong to the lower-middle classes and the poor. Their salaries oscillate between US\$300 and 1200 a month per family. It is estimated that the minimum necessary for a family to live in Argentina (the poverty line) fluctuates around US\$900; thus, numerous families in Villa Eulalia don't have enough to cover their basic necessities. Hence, many families depend on state welfare. Another poignant problem for Villa Eulalia's inhabitants is the deficit of neighbourhood infrastructure: proper sewerage, water, transportation, street asphalt are lacking in the whole area creating serious difficulties for most inhabitants. As said, local institutions and most of the neighbourhood's associative life are pervaded by forms of political patronage. Hence, for inhabitants to become beneficiaries of the local social services or to be successful in negotiating improvements in the neighbourhood's infrastructure, they need to become 'clients' of the dominating political apparatuses. In this relation, clients must vote for a candidate in exchange for some sort of benefit, which is really something they are entitled to just as inhabitants of a certain area. As a reaction to this abusive political practice, people demand more clean politics where politicians do not privilege their own personal or party interests over the common well being.

The role perception of the political leaders interviewed in the neighbourhood clearly illustrates the situation described above. For example Chichi, a Justicialista leader, was appointed as a 'Neighbourhood Advisor'. Formally, the Neighbourhood Advisor is a paid position, appointed by the Deliberative Council (the legislative power of the Municipality), with the function of notifying inhabitants of local policies, acting as a neighbourhood agent in the implementation of social programs and informing the legislative body of the social situation of the neighbourhood inhabitants. The way Chichi understood her job as advisor clearly contrasts with this formal profile. She had named the place where she assisted people 'Justicialista Affiliation Centre N°1', and defined her role in the following way:

Chichi-I was given this job by Councillor José, so he is my boss really. And my job is to deliver the food, clothing and so on that he gives me, and also to affiliate people. Because that is my job as well, to get people affiliated to the party.

It clearly follows from Chichi's definition that, on the one hand, she was using state resources derived from social programs to promote her party's cause; on the other hand, she was also inclined

to pressure people to affiliate using her power to dispose of the much needed resources she distributed. Her perception of her political role was far from unique; a nearby leader of the opposing party --the Unión Cívica Radical-- defined politics in similar way: 'Politics are a feedback circle, I help the people and in return they support me with their affiliation and vote.' People's reaction to this kind of practice is very clearly expressed by Elvira who during a critical situation had asked Chichi for assistance.

Elvira -Chichi? I don't like her at all.

Researcher -You don't like Chichi?

Elvira -No, she's a bitch, she's a self-interested bitch.

Researcher - And she's a Peronist Advisor?

Elvira - I think she's a Neighbourhood Advisor, I don't know what that means.

Researcher -Ah, a Neighbourhood Advisor.

Elvira -Well that's what she is. She's one of those.

Researcher -And she is a Peronist?

Elvira -Well of course. The other day they signed me up to be a Peronist too.

Researcher -And you don't like Peronists?

Elvira -No. Because they call you *compañera* [partner, companion], but they say it in a way... you can see that they are being false from a mile away. And the other day I signed up to be a *compañera* as well, at least in that way, I said, they'll give me something.

Researcher -You signed up to get what, the food that Chichi distributes?

Elvira -I signed up because she asked me if I wanted to affiliate to some party, and if I wanted to affiliate to hers. So I said sure, why not?. Like as I said it's the same for me.

Researcher -And then what happened?

Elvira -Well, one day I went, I don't know if she was giving out milk, I don't remember what she was giving --oh yes-- she was distributing some school clothes for the kids, so I signed up to get some clothing for Adrian [one of Elvira's sons] and that same day they asked me if I wanted to join to the Peronist party. So I say --okay-- since I am here; if we are dancing let's dance.

The previous quote shows how independent people's demands, due to the patronage networks of the major political parties, do not find an answer through the expected channels. In case they find an answer, it is only by accepting the extortion of political patrons. As said, this context of patronage gives Pentecostal congregations a subsidiary political role. That is, even if the purpose of creating and developing a congregation is not to become an alternative channel to assist people in need or to express demands to improve neighbourhood infrastructure, they occasionally do play this role. Sometimes, Pentecostals are conscious of the political implications of their actions, in other cases they are not. However, even in the latter cases, they do constitute an alternative to the parties' patronage networks and in this they play a political role. I show how this happens in the next section using what Geertz (1973) has called 'thick description'.

The Political Roles of a Pentecostal Community

The scarce spaces for participation and the extortion characteristic of local political groups, evidently contrasts with the way in which the biggest Pentecostal congregation of the neighbourhood developed and currently functions. The organisational structure of the church, although it has a certain hierarchical order, provides wide spaces for participation within which only very loose control is exerted. The structure is composed by a head-pastor, who is followed

hierarchically by four other pastors, each being economically sustained by the congregation. The pastors are all from the area and maintain the same socio-economic standards as the rest of the population. Previous to becoming pastors their occupations were mason, mechanic, butcher, and soda deliverer respectively; this acts as an example to the rest of the congregation, showing how any committed member may reach the leading positions in church.

Beyond the position of pastor there are many other leading roles in which people may feel protagonists of the Church's life. People may be 'area leaders' heading a group of followers within a particular sector of the neighbourhood. Within these groups there are other leadership positions, thus allowing more followers to be protagonists. Besides these leading roles, there are many other opportunities for active involvement in the other types of services that take place at Church or at people's homes: Youth Services, Women Services, Elderly People's services, Prayer Meetings, House Meetings, all these activities allow different people to occupy some space in the organisational structure of the Church.

The intense interaction between church members fostered through all these activities and the possibility of becoming protagonists in them, plus the charismatic character of the Pentecostal ritual produces an emotional identification of church members. In this way, even if people usually approach church due to health, economical or family problems, they find that the congregation provides other, perhaps unexpected, payoffs: contrasting with the extortive character of patronage networks, the aforementioned demands for close human relations in the neighbourhood find a haven in the Pentecostal congregation. This is not something that goes unnoticed by people, many of my interviewees praised the fact that the congregation is 'like a family' and adduced this when explaining why they remained in church. But the Pentecostal congregation does not only provide 'warm feelings'. Bonds of solidarity also are sources of material support, especially during difficult times. This also permits the church to sometimes substitute for the patronage networks of political parties, social assistance acquires in this way a political dimension.

Elvira's case serves as example, showing how her experiences in the Pentecostal community contrast with her encounter with local political leaders. Elvira approached the Pentecostal congregation for the same reasons she went to Chichi: she needed some assistance. Her grandfather (already a believer) had recommended her to 'go and see what the brothers can do for you'. In her first visit, the Area Pastor in charge of the block where Elvira lived, gave her some clothing and food, and invited her to participate in the next Sunday service. Elvira accepted the invitation: 'I did it out of curiosity, I saw that my grandfather liked services so I decided to see what it was like.' Elvira liked the joyful atmosphere of the services, the songs, the testimonies, the warm attitude of pastors to newcomers and increased her participation in church. She then became an active member, from then on asking for assistance to church brothers and sisters, and not resorting any more to Chichi.

It's better with brothers [in church] because it is like a family where everybody helps everybody. In Chichi's case you depend on her, and you have to do what she wants you to, you have to play by her rules. Here [in the church] you don't feel that pressure, you just tell the pastor 'look I need some help', he then asks the brothers and sisters to help you and they do it with joy and with no conditions, just because they are your brothers and sisters, because we all are God's children.

Elvira's case is not an exception, as reported by many researchers (Roberts, 1968; Mariz, 1994) assistance between church members in practical matters is very frequent: help in job seeking, financial aid in critical moments, and the like are habitual among members of the Pentecostal

community. As shown in Elvira's case, this is not only an economic resource that the congregation provides, but it also plays a political role by acting as a more acceptable alternative to the extortionary and patronising options offered by political parties. In addition to these cases, the Pentecostal congregation has acted as a conduit for demands to improve neighbourhood infrastructure, helping people to by-pass political patronage networks. In these circumstances it has transcended the role of responding only to the individual needs of a church member, and has assumed a political role in community matters that involve people who are not Pentecostal believers. However, it is noteworthy that these cases did generate some tension within the community and conflicts with traditional Pentecostal doctrine.

One of the demands for which the congregation served as a conduit was for street asphalt. A group of people, not integrated in any political or social neighbourhood association, were trying to get the municipality to pave one of the most important streets in the area. This was very relevant to them since they lived far away from bus roads; on rainy days they had to walk some 10 or 15 blocks through mud to get to the bus stop. However, this independent group of neighbours did not want their initiative to be capitalised by any political party. Thus, they were looking for an independent institution to channel their demand. Finally, they decided to ask one of the Pentecostal pastors (the Area Pastor responsible for that zone) if he was willing to act as mediator between the people and the municipality. After giving some thought to the matter the Area Pastor accepted. He sensed that: 'by establishing close contact with the people we may find more ways to spread God's words to unbelievers.' Following this first experience, further plans were made by this group to demand more urban infrastructure --a more efficient garbage disposal system.

These initiatives, however, did generate certain debates among groups of church members. Some agreed with the Area Pastor's attitude, others thought that this was a too worldly involvement. I reproduce part of the discussion that took place during one of the doctrinal courses given in church to show how conflict took place. The following dialogue developed between two students of the course while discussing whether Evangelicals should get involved 'in the world'.

Alberto -With pastor Marcos [the aforementioned Area Pastor] we are collaborating with some neighbours to improve our environment. What we are doing is to present a letter that some people wrote to the municipality. We are asking authorities to pave some of the streets so people won't have to walk through mud so much on their way to work. I think that we are not from this world but we have our feet in it, so we must help other people, even if they are not believers.

Beba -Well, I think that that is... I don't know, but getting involved in politics, in political things, I am not sure we should do this. God wants us to evangelise, to spread the word, to win new converts, and when everybody has heard the message and opened their hearts there will be no need to ask for things or send letters, or organise. People will do good spontaneously, because they are going to have a new heart.

Alberto -Yes, but what are we going to do meanwhile? Just wait? No, I think God wants us to help others, also to give testimony of what Christians can do in this world, to give testimony of God's power. Also in that way we may win souls, showing how Christians may get involved in things of this world, but not as people of this world. We can participate in politics without becoming corrupt.

A similar example, but with different results, took place when a group of lay church members took the initiative of founding a primary school and a kindergarten. The school was relevant in the neighbourhood context since good educational services were lacking in the area and thus demands for more and better schools were often expressed by the locals. Again, the initiative aroused

conflicts within the congregation since the foundation of the school implied that a significant amount of church resources (leaders, pastors and funds) had to be diverted from evangelisation. The head-pastor's reaction to this deviation of resources obstructed the initiative. Here is how he tackled the matter during a service:

[...]I still feel that we should be more in the task of wining souls, of enlarging the temple, to work more. I wouldn't like that because of the school I, or... [other pastors] would be affected [diverting time from evangelisation into the school project]. I am already short of time; because these may be even the Evil one's plans. I think it is more important to win souls [...]

In this brief description of the way in which local politics and Pentecostalism are linked we found ambiguity. In certain circumstances (as the demands for street asphalt) the local congregation was willing to enter the political terrain and act as an alternative channel to express the people's demands. In other cases --for example, the foundation of a primary school--, the congregation was not willing to assume any social obligations. My claim throughout this article has been that this kind of paradoxical behaviour may be explained by referring to, at least, some of the five criteria presented in the introduction. Particularly important here are factor (i), the central character of evangelisation; factor (iii), the instrumental character of politics; factor (iv), the influence of previously constituted ideologies and factor (v), the malleability of doctrine.

The paramount character of evangelisation may be perceived in all cases. All the previous debates circle around how entering the socio-political terrain may affect the congregation's evangelising capacities. This can be perceived in the debate between Alberto and Beba. Beba's main argument against political involvement is that they should concentrate on evangelisation instead of diverting their interests towards politics. Alberto's response does not question the central character of evangelisation, instead he argues that playing socio-political roles in the neighbourhood may be a good way to win souls. Also Head Pastor Marcos, when explaining why he became 'politically involved' he argued that this could help him 'spread God's words to unbelievers'. Thus, all arguments recognise evangelisation as the church's central task; socio-political involvement must be 'instrumental' to it in order to be accepted. This is even more clear in the head-pastor's reaction against the adult school; his main objection to this plan is that it negatively affects the church's evangelising capacities. It is then clear how in local contexts (as in national ones) political involvement has also an instrumental character and evangelisation is the paramount motivational factor. Further analysis shows the presence of factors (iv) and (v) as well.

Before turning Pentecostal Alberto had been involved in a Communist worker's association, although he left the association upon conversion he still sustained part of his former ideology. Contrastingly, Beba had never been involved in politics because: 'even before becoming a believer I thought politics were dirty.' This new data shows what inspires the different interpretations of doctrine that Alberto and Beba make. The more leftist position embraced by Alberto and the more conservative posture of Beba may both proceed from their secular political ideologies. Thus, factor (iv) is present. Also, it is possible to see in the debate between Alberto and Beba how (factor v) the malleability of Pentecostal doctrine allows both contrasting positions to be sustained by making reference to it. Thus, we may conclude that for Pentecostals, even in local contexts, evangelisation is always a priority over socio-political involvement. However, given the influence of secular political ideologies and the malleability of doctrine, different Pentecostals may alternatively argue that involvement fosters evangelisation or is an obstacle to it.

Finally, something should be said in relation to the political role played by the social assistance that Pentecostal networks provide --Elvira's is the case in point here. As noted, helping brothers

and sisters is part of the Pentecostals' congregational practice; not only in the case presented here, it is a common feature of Pentecostal communities in general as reported by almost every study of Latin American Pentecostalism. Thus, in this case there is no ambiguity in Pentecostal behaviour. This kind of help is provided by almost all Pentecostals in very different circumstances. This is not casual, it responds to a common feature of Pentecostal doctrine: helping brothers and sisters is a strong commandment among Pentecostals. What is also true about this practice is that for Pentecostals this does not have political connotations. What is particular to this case are exactly the political implications this has in the Argentine context. Implications related to the context of political patronage in which it takes place. Thus, this situation, to an extent, escapes the five factor model we are applying here. But it does so because Pentecostals perceive this as an intrinsic part of their community life, not as political activity.

Explaining the Ambiguity of Pentecostal Political Behaviour

What stems from the previous accounts of the relationships between Pentecostals and politics is that the former do not play a paramount role in Argentine politics. This for two reasons: one is that politics are not very important for most of the Argentine Pentecostals; another that their intervention is not decisive in the major political issues: Pentecostal opinion and suffrage does not overturn electoral poles or strongly influence Argentines beyond church limits. However, this does not mean that Pentecostals are completely innocuous in the Argentine political scene. They have played a certain role in the issue of religious freedom and in local political contexts.

Looking at the roles played in these arenas we may conclude that authors sustaining the 'paradoxical behaviour' hypothesis have offered the more sound theory hitherto. Pentecostals may be, in certain circumstances, a democratising force even if not really following democratic principles; as in the issue of religious liberties. There are certain Pentecostals that prefer conservative politics while others are more progressive, as shown in the schism within the political party. And there are situations in which Pentecostals may engage in socio-political activism, while in other cases they may be reluctant to enter such arena, as in the neighbourhood. I hope to have proven in this text that this ambiguous behaviour can be explained by referring to the five intervening factors mentioned in the introduction: the paramount character of evangelisation; leaders' quest for more outstanding positions; the instrumental relation towards politics; the impact of secular political ideologies, and the malleable character of doctrine.

The analysis of the different cases explored here permits us to go one step further and show the logical connections between these five factors: The first two factors represent the basic motives Pentecostals may have to enter politics. Thus, Pentecostals enter politics when: i) they feel that this enhances their evangelising capabilities by putting their churches in institutionally more powerful situations; ii) leaders perceive they may use politics to try to promote themselves to more advantageous positions. Because these are the basic motivations, politics in themselves are not important for Pentecostals and thus the relationships they establish towards it are most of the time pragmatic or instrumental: they seek political involvement as long as this contributes to religious aims. Even if these are the core elements influencing Pentecostal political practice, there is another significant factor. Pentecostals may have secular political ideologies or identities --a political idiosyncrasy acquired before conversion or inspired by secular views which are initially not influenced by Pentecostal doctrine. Although the core elements may never be neglected, secular political identities or ideologies may influence the way the core aims are pursued --because of the former some Pentecostals see politics as a channel for evangelisation, others as an obstacle; some

see their doctrine close to right wing politics and others to more progressive ideologies. Given the malleable character of Pentecostal doctrine, within certain limits, all these different positions may be equally justified. It is this particular combination of influential factors what explains the floating, ambiguous Pentecostal political practice.

Now, the question that still remains to be elucidated is whether this model could also be used in other circumstances and cases. What would happen if we tried to apply this same scheme to explain the relationship between Pentecostals and politics in Brazil, for example?. In many respects the Brazilian case differs from the Argentinean. One thing is that in Brazil Pentecostal initiatives to enter in alliance with political parties have been successful; some Pentecostal candidates have entered congress thanks to them. Also, as Freston (1993) has reported, it seems that in Brazil Pentecostal suffrage does support Evangelical candidates --brothers do vote for brothers. However, these circumstantial differences do not necessarily refute the model. It may well be that different political ideologies or a more open attitude towards religion from traditional politicians may be explaining these differences. If this were the case these contrasts would not necessarily escape the explanatory power of this model. However, much comparison and refinement is necessary before the true relevance of the model can be established.

Notes

¹I wish to thank the Antorchas Foundation for their financial support and Matt Maróstica for his comments and English editing.

²The evidence used in this section was collected between 1992 and 1997 when I did research on Argentine Pentecostalism. Information was gathered by canvassing literature produced by different Pentecostal ministries, through interviewing Pentecostal leaders and attending meetings at different levels and it also involved fieldwork in Villa Eulalia a neighbourhood in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. There I did research between 1988 and 1995 on the political, social and religious institutions.

³The process that lead to this expansion is too complex to develop here in full. It was a process that resulted from a combination of several influential factors: i) a negative economic situation which affected the living standards of lower-class Argentines; ii) a context of increased political freedom; iii) new forms of leadership and ritual developed among Pentecostals favoring the expansion of an already growing church. As a result of these processes Pentecostals became around a 10 per cent of the Argentine population after 1985; after being only a 2.5 per cent in 1960. For a more thorough account of the growth of Pentecostalism in Argentina see Wynarczyk and Seman (1994, 1995); Maróstica (1997); and Míguez (1998).

⁴Menem belongs to the Peronist Party --one of the two traditional parties in Argentina (the other being the *Unión Cívica Radical* --UCR). He was the second democratically elected president after Argentina's return to democracy in 1983. After the presidency of Alfonsín (1983-1989) who belonged to the UCR, Menem ruled for two consecutive periods (1989-1995; 1995-1999).

⁵I follow here the traditional division between Historical, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Historical churches are those directly derived from the Lutheran reform. These churches arrived in Argentina during the nineteenth century, especially through North-European immigration and never had evangelisation as a central aim. Evangelical churches (mainly Baptists and Plymouth Brethren) arrived in Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century, were influenced by the North American spiritual awakenings of the nineteenth century and did have evangelisation as a central task. Pentecostal churches first arrived to Argentina in 1909 through migratory networks and then through independent missionaries. In addition to evangelisation they had as a

central ritual and doctrinal element the baptism in the Holy Spirit. This differentiates them from the other evangelical groups. I will use these terminology to differentiate among Protestants, this term --Protestants-- is used to refer to the three groups in general.

⁶Gimenez is one of the better-known Pentecostal pastors. Together with pastors Cabrera and Anacondia he is one of the leaders responsible for the activation of the Pentecostal field during the 1980s as mentioned in a previous note. Cabrera's, Anacondia's and Gimenez's ministries blossomed, especially, during the second half of the eighties. Cabrera, for example, reached 107.600 adherents in 1987, in 1989 Gimenez's main church had a daily attendance of 14.000, and Anacondia reached an average attendance rate of 36.445 in each massive evangelising campaign in 1986 (Wynarczyck, 1989). Besides their growth, these leaders introduced new forms of campaigning and discourse that went beyond the limits of their own churches, unifying the movement and producing new dynamics in the Evangelical field in general (Marostica, 1997: 53 ff). However, even if these ministries did dynamise the Evangelical field, they did not become the major national Pentecostal churches, original groups such as the Assemblies of God or the Union of the Assemblies of God still outnumber in churches and adherents the new ministries (Wynarczyck and de Majo, 1995).

⁷ The unofficial motives were inferred from my own observation and interviewing of group members.

⁸See Metalí (1991) Gaxiola (1991) Freston (1993) Burdick (1993) for the Brazilian, Peruvian and Central American cases.

⁹Recent surveys done by Roemers show that Pentecostals consistently vote Peronism over any other party.

¹⁰The attitude of the Pentecostal electorate questions, to a certain extent, my previous claim that Pentecostals' political behavior is pragmatic, always giving privilege to evangelisation over any other political motivation. In this case, it seems that secular political ideologies (like Peronism) take preeminence over the Pentecostal one and thus people don't vote following the characteristic priorities of the movement. What may explain this is that among the Pentecostal constituency there are different degrees of compromise with church. Thus, although following Pentecostal doctrine in many aspects of life, a number of church-goers do not do it in what concerns the political field. If this were the case, this fact would not necessarily counter my current argument since these people would not be adopting a Pentecostal behavior in what concerns politics. They are not acting as Pentecostals, instead they behave as Peronists, Socialists, or are following any other political ideology.

¹¹The effectiveness of this lobbying has not laid in the mere strength of Protestantism, which is not much, but it made more public and evident the restrictive measures present in the law of cults in front of an unfavourable public opinion. The costs this could have for supporting congressmen has deterred their action and support.

¹²The name of the neighbourhood and of its inhabitants has been changed to preserve the privacy of my informants. The research done in the area comprised participant observation and interviewing in some of the more important social institutions, local political posts and Pentecostal and Catholic churches. The evidence presented below is not only based on observation but also in 60 life stories collected during research, and in statistical data obtained through secondary sources. More information on the neighbourhood's political and religious institutions may be found elsewhere (Míguez, 1995; 1998).

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