Kairos moments and cultural connections as factors in religious change in Argentina

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The Changing Religious Field

Religious changes in Latin America have been noted with growing interest in Christian circles in the North. For Roman Catholics these changes have brought increasing concern as Catholics appear to be gradually losing their religious hegemony in many Latin American countries. In Evangelical circles the changes have been greeted with enthusiasm, and often overstated or hyped for the benefit of the Evangelical public, who, distressed with losses on the home front are comforted by accounts of the amazing growth of the Evangelical Church in the South. Perhaps these changes first came to the attention of the wider public through the publication of David Stoll’s *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (1990). The sensationalist title even catches the attention of the person normally uninterested in religious affairs.

It is undoubtedly true that huge changes have taken place in the Argentine religious field over the past half century; however, in general the Protestant world has only been interested in the growth of the Evangelical Church, assuming that this has been at the cost of the Roman Catholic Church. Changes in other areas have attracted little attention. Northern Christians however must not imagine that all religious change is towards evangelicalism, even though this is the major shift; nor that these new *evangelicos* are Christian in the same way that they are.

Demonstrating these changes statistically is not easy as accurate figures are notoriously hard to get hold of. However, if we start with the 1967 estimate of Arno Enns (1971:184) of an evangelical community of 4.1%, this will help us gauge the changes. In 1992 Wynarczyk, Semán, and Majo, (1995) estimated that 5% of the population of the Federal Capital of Buenos Aires were non Catholic. A more extensive sociological survey was carried out by the University of Quilmes and the University of Buenos Aires in the suburb of Quilmes, and published in 2001. (Esquivel et al, 2001:41) This survey reveals that 77.5% of the population claim Roman Catholic affiliation, 10.2% have no religion, and another 10.2% are “evángélico”. This figure becomes even more interesting when it is analysed according to socio-economic level.

Table: Religious affiliation according to socio-economic level. (In per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Middle to High</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholics</td>
<td>79.2</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangélicos</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charismatics</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umbanda</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritist</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
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This research reveals clearly the great differences in religious identity across the socio-economic divide. The *evangélicos* have a much higher level of adherents in the poorer sectors of Argentine society but the higher and middle levels have remained much stronger in their affiliation to the Catholic Church.
The above table shows clearly that the religious field in Argentina is divided largely between the Roman Catholic Church and various branches of Protestantism. The table does not reveal the presence of other religious options except for Umbanda and Spiritism, presumably because these were the most significant others in Quilmes. However, there is a significant minority of Jews, and smaller minorities of Muslims, Buddhists, Christian sects such as Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses and representatives of many New Age groups. The table also does not clearly reveal the changes taking place within Catholicism except for the small growth of Charismatics. There is some evidence to suggest that although adherence to formal Catholicism may have tailed off; there is growth in popular Catholicism and in folk religion. One example of this is the spread of the cult of Gauchito Gil from the north to the southern tip of Argentina during the last ten years.

What is clear is that during the past forty years Argentina has become increasingly pluralist with almost all religious options becoming available. So although conversions from Roman Catholicism to some form of Protestantism accounts for the vast majority of the religious change it would be quite inaccurate to assume that this covers all religious change. Argentines have become increasingly aware of other religious options, particularly through cable TV, literature and promotional classes. It is my view that all new religious movements are growing and are drawing mostly from a population that was previously non-committed religiously. As Mallimaci observes, “what we are living though is a slow but continuous transformation of religious space”. (2001:17)

Kairos moments

Protestants started arriving in Argentina in 1818, and their gradual penetration has been likened to four faces, (Miguez Bonino 1997) or four waves, (Wynarczyk, 1998:1) that, roughly speaking, conform to four types of confession. In Latin America all of these Protestantisms are referred to as “evangélicos”. The first wave basically corresponds with the historic churches, the second wave to the missionary denominations and faith missions. The third wave corresponds to classical Pentecostals and the fourth to the neo-Pentecostals. It would be quite incorrect to imagine that these ‘waves’ correspond to neat time periods, one succeeding the other, as the first had not finished when the second began, and the third was almost right on top of the second. It would also be incorrect to assume that all present day local churches will fit neatly into this classification.

Impressive church growth however did not come until the mid 1950’s. The first boost to growth came with the campaign of North American evangelist, Tommy Hicks, in 1954. The healing campaign ran for eight weeks and brought Pentecostalism to the nation’s attention. It led to a growth spurt for many churches and particularly for the Union of the Assemblies of God. Hicks came at a key or Kairos moment, just when the nation was ready to receive him. Steady but slow growth continued until the mid 1980’s when Protestantism received its second and greater boost. In the fifteen or so years leading up to the year 2000 the protestant population at least doubled its percentage, with its penetration most notable amongst the poorer sectors. Why is it that the evangelicos increased much more in this period than in the period following the Tommy Hicks campaign?

Besides a genuine outpouring of the Holy Spirit several factors came together to create a kairos moment for the evangelical church in Argentina. Here I will look only at three factors although others may be identified.
Firstly, in 1983 the military dictatorship came to an end with defeat in the Malvinas/Falklands War. This led to new freedoms including freedom of conscience and worship. With freedom of religion came an unprecedented change in attitude towards non-Catholic expressions of faith: tolerance, openness and experimentation, replaced antagonism. In a context where people were searching for answers, and were open to new religious alternatives, many new religions entered the country and people felt free to try them out. These new religions included Afro-Brazilian spiritism, many New Age groups, and neo-Pentecostalism.

Secondly, during the 1980’s Argentina started producing its own ‘super-evangelists’. Local evangelists modelled themselves on Hicks and other North American tele-evangelists such as Billy Graham, and latterly Benny Hinn. The most influential of these new Argentine evangelists were Omar Cabrera, Carlos Annacondia and the now disgraced Hector Giménez; however, they are only three famous examples amongst many. More recent ‘star pastors’ are Claudio Friedzon, Osvaldo Carnival, and Guillermo Prien. All have developed city centre mega churches from small beginnings. These men are iconic in the sense that many, perhaps thousands, of ordinary pastors of small churches at the neighbourhood level copy their style, message and programmes.

Thirdly, the message preached by these home grown evangelists was one which resonated with the Argentine public in a way which previous presentations of the gospel did not do. It is my thesis that it is precisely because these evangelists managed to contextualise the gospel to the Argentine general public that they have been successful and the evangelicos have grown enormously in Argentina. So what makes their message distinct from previous presentations of the gospel?

**Connecting with Culture**

Earlier forms of Protestantism had concentrated on the gospel message of individual salvation by faith for the repentant sinner; it was essentially a message to be believed in and accepted for oneself. With the coming of the earliest Pentecostals this did not essentially change, only the experience of speaking in tongues was added to it. However, a vital shift was made by Tommy Hicks, and it was one which disturbed many evangelicals at the time: Hicks apparently healed many people without making conversion a pre-requisite. A message of miracles without repentance or commitment was a departure from previous Pentecostal practice and brought him much criticism. However, the many testimonies of those healed drew hundreds of thousands to the campaign; Hicks had obviously, although unconsciously, connected with something in the Argentine context to bring such a response. Local evangelists were to make more deliberate adaptations and have even greater influence. Here I will consider briefly the two most famous examples.

**Omar Cabrera** was greatly influenced by Morris Cerullo and as a result his ministry, Visión de Futuro (VDF), emphasised healing and prosperity. Cabrera, in a deliberate attempt to contextualise to the Argentine Catholic context, did not distinguish between Roman Catholic and Evangelical churches. He wore the clerical collar of a Catholic parish priest, called himself ‘Reverend’, avoided ‘evangelical’ jargon and used instead ‘catholic’ terminology as it was better understood by the people. These differences were a deliberate effort to make his ministry more acceptable to the Roman Catholic masses who viewed him as a priest with supernatural powers. (Saracco, 1989:237)

In the mid 1980’s **Carlos Annacondia**, a successful business man, started developing a ministry called, Mensaje de Salvación which had as its motto, “Jesus loves you, saves you and heals you”. The message he preached was simple, biblical and evangelistic, the music used Latin rhythms and soft rock, but it was his ministry of healing and deliverance that drew
the huge crowds. The most notable aspect of his ministry was the confrontation, or battle, with demons and witchcraft in prayer at the end of the sermon, at which point demonic manifestations were common. Because of the enormous demand for these ministries he set up a separate ‘tent of deliverance’ which became an established and integral part of every campaign. Local churches sent workers ahead of time to be trained and they prayed for the people who were carried into this tent.

Saracco holds that the ministry of Annacondia in the mid to late 1980’s had more lasting impact on the Argentine religious scene than the campaign of Tommy Hicks. Not only did large numbers change their religious allegiance from catholicism to evangelicalism but there was a widespread “pentecostalization” (Wynarczyk, 1995:12) of previously established evangelical churches. This pentecostalization was of the newer form that emphasised healing, exorcism and miraculous signs rather than spirit baptism and glossolalia.

Levels of connection

Neo-Pentecostals have continued to bring new things to the religious field of Argentina, but here we will only consider some ways in which they connect with the local culture as I believe this is a key element in their success. It seems clear that they are able to connect on various levels, some superficial and some profound.

Cabrera particularly tried to connect on the level of self presentation and use of language; it was a bold decision, and the result sometimes led to confusion and criticism, but he gained a widespread following with the masses. Annacondia attempted to connect through the use of Latin American music and local church leaders. However, I do not see that this level of connection is sufficient to account for their mass appeal, and subsequent church growth; the real connection lies at a deeper cultural level.

Argentina’s neo-Pentecostal evangelists also connect with the culture at the level of healing praxis through symbols. For example, a common practice in healing rituals is to use photos and clothing to represent the sick or cursed person. The pastor blesses the item and the blessing is carried home to the needy. This is familiar to people because curanderos also use such items for healing and for making curses.

At an even deeper level neo-Pentecostal evangelists connect at the level of worldview assumptions. All of Argentina’s iconic pastors can do at least two things. They can ‘bring down’ the presence of God, and they can demonstrate the power of God in some way, particularly in healing and exorcism. They are therefore in some sense spiritual power brokers. This connects with certain Argentine worldview assumptions active at the level of popular religion.

For the majority of Argentine people God is the ultimate source of all power, and access to this power is necessary to live a good life. Particularly when things go wrong it is essential to somehow tap into God’s power. This is also assumed by Pentecostals. Traditionally people attempt to access God’s power through beseeching the mediations of a saint. They may approach the saint directly or perhaps seek the help of a spiritual power broker such as a priest or curandero. (Even the people who claimed to have ‘no religion’ in the Quilmes survey frequently had recourse to curanderos.) God however, remains somewhat remote, and there is usually no immediate evidence that he has heard or will respond. In Pentecostalism however the believer has immediate direct evidence of the presence of God in their own bodily responses of uncontrollable shaking, falling, glossolalia, and sometimes trance: so even if God does not answer in the way that they want, they can at least feel sure that he has heard. However, to claim that the removal of the saints gives believers direct access to
God’s power may be theologically accepted, but is rarely true in practice. Most Pentecostals access God’s power through a pastor, prophet or exorcist. These people, not always men, fulfil the power broker function of the Catholic priest and folk healer, but with demonstrably more power.

It is not hard to understand why people, especially the poor, are attracted to a powerful healer, but it may at first be more difficult to understand how someone could build their ministry almost exclusively on the relatively rare phenomenon of demon possession, as Annacondia has done. Argentine folklore is full of stories and allusions to the devil, but for most people they are just that, folk tales, not something that impinges upon their lives, and so they maintain the ideas of devil and demons as theoretically tenable but distant. Nevertheless they exist. Argentines also love a spectacle, and demonic manifestations undoubtedly make a good show. In order to minimize the element of show Annacondia instituted the tent of deliverance to which affected people were carried, in order to be treated in relative privacy. Despite this there is still a drama until they are carried away. Whatever explanation is offered for these manifestations it certainly appears that in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s it was not a rare phenomenon. Even allowing for a percentage of people with psychological problems, and some who simply wanted attention, there seems to have been a significant number who were genuinely demon possessed. What can account for this increase in occurrence? One explanation, which I offer rather hesitantly, is that this increase in manifestation coincided with the spread of the Afro-Brazilian religions. These religions are spiritistic in nature, inviting the possession of African and Indian entities. There were many more people who treated the Afro-Brazilian _pais_ and _mais_ as _curanderos_, to whom they occasionally went for help, than there were those who became committed members. Many of these people later found themselves in serious spiritual trouble. From an evangelical perspective it is another _kairos_ moment. At the time of increasing spiritist activity an empowered evangelist arose who could dramatically and convincingly demonstrate God’s power over demons by commanding them to flee.

**Conclusion**

The Argentine iconic evangelists did bring new things to the evangelical scene, but more important to their success was that they connected with people at the level of folk religion, but with more obvious access to God’s power than traditional power brokers. Western charismatics have sometimes said their movement was essentially about praise, presence and power, with the neo-Pentecostals adding prosperity, but in Latin America new forms of Pentecostalism are undoubtedly about power. By this I do not mean political power, but rather gaining access to divine power to help solve life’s daily problems. In this they have been palpably successful, and in so doing, are fulfilling the traditional role of popular religion. Some would argue that they have actually become the Protestant version of popular religion.
Notes

1 The term 'northern' is used here rather than 'western' as that is the Latin American perspective. Latin America is in the geographical west but is also part of the global south, therefore 'western' influences come from the north.

2 The Spanish word “evangélico” includes all types of Protestant/ Evangelical/ Pentecostal churches. For the general populace the term also includes Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of the Latter Days Saints, and basically any group that is vaguely Christian but not Roman Catholic.

3 This figure may be inflated because he estimates the whole evangelical community (communicants × 4). In Argentina this came to 932,220 persons. The communicant number is multiplied by four because research in other countries showed that many more people identified themselves as evangelical than actually attended church regularly.

4 The researchers have made a difference between the Afro-brazilian spiritist religions such as Umbanda and other spiritist groups such as the Escuela Científica Basilio with a background in Kardec philosophy which attract a more middle class clientele.

5 This is how Argentine writers refer to important pastors of large churches. Pentecostal pastors sometimes call them “los mayores” i.e. the great ones.

6 For ethnographic stories describing this in practice see the authors' book Missionary Musings.

7 Traditional healers of many kinds

8 Priests and priestesses

9 For ethnographic stories describing this in practice see the author's book Missionary Musings.

10 For more extensive analysis see author’s thesis on Argentine Pentecostalism – forthcoming.

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**Biography of the Author**

Wilma Wells Davies: BA in Social Anthropology from Queens University Belfast, Northern Ireland; MA in Missiology from the Open University England; at present she is completing a doctorate in the University of Birmingham, UK, on Pentecostalism in Argentina. Wilma has five years experience as a missionary in Taiwan, and nine years as a missionary with Latin Link in Argentina where she was involved in the missionary training programmes of three seminaries. She has also been a visiting lecturer in All Nations Christian College and the Baptist Seminary/University of Bucharest. She is married to Paul Davies, tutor in Theology of Mission at All Nations Christian College, England.

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