

Testimony



A Pamphlet from Pax Christi San Antonio

Anticipating September 2, 2018

Pax Christi San Antonio does not solicit donations; however, anyone wishing to join should make a donation to Pax Christi U.S.A. and notify Maria Tobin, matob@aol.com, to receive email messages sent to members. Pax Christi International was founded in 1945 with the encouragement of Bishop Pierre Marie Théas of Montauban, France, by Marthe Doret Claudot, as a Christian lay organization dedicated to preventing a repetition of the savagery of the twentieth century's world wars.

Please do not respond to this newsletter's address; but send comments on the newsletter to
J6anthonyblasi@yahoo.com.

Editorial

After the Calendar, The commentaries on the Second and Third Readings are based on the liturgy for the Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time. Rather than a poem, Tom Keene offers a story; for Tom's poems, see <http://www.tomkeeneandthemuse.com/index.php>. Antonio Spadaro, SJ and Marcelo Figueroa have received considerable attention for their critiques of contemporary developments in religion, most recently for their essay in *La Civiltà Cattolica* on the prosperity gospel. The text of their essay is given after the other items below.

Last month in Philadelphia I took a complimentary copy of the local newspaper with me and sat down to hear some presentations. The front page had the leading story about the Pennsylvania grand jury report on the sexual predatory practices of several hundred Catholic clergy over the previous seventy years. "When will this ever end?" I grumbled. A Paulist campus chaplain from another state had sat down next to me and asked me what I was talking about. Even after the Theodore McCarrick escapades had been in the news, neither of us had expected the latest shocking revelations. I recall in the 1990s, when a bishop in a largely rural diocese mishandled a case involving a priest on the staff of a minor seminary (later also a bishop), someone began forwarding to me e-mails the angry priests of the diocese were sending to the bishop. They pulled no punches. There are always official apologies and promises of reform, and such were and are surely appropriate if not sufficient; but somehow the private online outbursts were more revealing.

Calendar

In Austin

Tuesday September 11, 12:00pm-1:00pm, discussion: "Racism—The Sickness of the American Soul." Sorin Oak, immediately east of the Main Building, St. Edward's University, 3001 S. Congress. Sponsored by the SEU Center for Ethics and Leadership. Bring picnic.

Thursday September 20, 5:00pm-6:30pm, Margaret Groarke, Ph.D., on voter suppression. Fleck Hall 305, St. Edward's University, 3001 S. Congress.

Wednesday October 10, 12:00pm-1:00pm, Peniel E. Joseph, Ph.D. (Barbara Jordan Chair in Ethics and Political Values, University of Texas, Austin). Heyer Lecture. McMillan 210, Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 100 E. 27th St.

Thursday October 25, 5:00pm-6:30pm, Michael Lucas, "Low-income Legal Assistance." Fleck Hall, St. Edward's University, 3001 S. Congress.

In Dallas

Wednesday August 29, 12:00pm-1:30pm, Maj. Gen. Robert Latiff (Ret.), "Future War: Preparing for the New Global Battlefield"—ethical implications of new technology for the Dept. of Defense. Hmm. Free; information & reservations from Bora Laci, tower@smu.edu.

Wednesday September 5, 5:30pm-7:30pm, Lawrence Wright on his book, *God Save Texas: A Journey into the Soul of the Lone Star State*, an ethical-political commentary. McCord Auditorium, Southern Methodist University, 3225 University Blvd. Free, but reservation required: 214-768-3210 or CPHInfo@smu.edu

Thursday September 13, 10:00am-5:00pm, Global Refugee Policy Symposium: Susan Martin (Georgetown U.), Hardy Vieux (Human Rights First), Liz Cedillo-Pereira (City of Dallas), John Thon Majork (Woodrow Wilson International Center), Elizabeth Ferris (Georgetown U.), Elisa Massimino (Harvard Kennedy School), and Matt Reynolds (UN). Martha Proctor Mack Grand Ballroom Southern Methodist University, 6425 Boaz Lane.

Thursday October 4, 5:30pm-7:30pm, Douglas Holtz-Eakin, Tax Cuts and Jobs Act: Growth Policy or Giveaway?" Miller Events Center, Southern Methodist University. Free, but reservations required: tower@smu.ed or Bora Laci 214-768-4716.

Monday October 15, 12:00pm-1:30pm, Susan Hayward (U.S. Institute for Peace), "Women, Religion and Peacebuilding: Illuminating the Unseen." Venue TBA at Southern Methodist University. Free, but reservations required: tower@smu.ed or Bora Laci 214-768-4716.

Thursday October 18, 5:30pm-7:30pm, Robert Kagan (Brookings Institute), America's Role as Enforcer of Peace and Order. Venue TBA at Southern Methodist University. Free, but reservations required: tower@smu.ed or Bora Laci 214-768-4716.

In Houston

Monday August 30, 7:00pm-8:30pm. Panel discussion: "Faith During and After Harvey: One Year Later." Alexander Johnson (Wheeler Ave. Baptist); Paula Pipes (Pipes Research); Jason Plotkin (Congregation Emanu El); Omar Samji (Aga Khan Council); moderated by Elaine Howard Ecklund (sociology, Rice University). Info for registration: Hayley Hemstreet, hjh2@rice.edu.

Tuesday September 18, 12:15pm-1:30pm, Simranjit Khalsa, "Practicing Minority Religion: A Study of Sikhs in England and the U.S." Kyle Morrow Room, Fondren Library, Rice University.

Sunday September 30, 2:30pm-6:00pm, film screening, "A Force More Powerful," on non-violent resistance, with panel discussion (Celebrating Gandhi's Legacy of Nonviolence). \$10.00. Asia Society Texas, 1370 Southmore Blvd.

Wednesday October 3, 7:00pm-8:30pm, panel discussion, "From Discrimination to Hate Crimes: A Conversation on What Americans of Minority Religions Are Facing Today." Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun; Christopher P. Scheitle, West Virginia University; Manpreet K. Singh, The Sikh Coalition. Rice University; for information contact Hayley Hemstreet, RPLP Program Manager, hjh2@rice.edu, 713-348-3974

In San Antonio

Saturday September 1, 10:00am, Pax Christi San Antonio meeting. Residence of Maria Tobin, 8715 Starcrest, #27. Contact matob@aol.com

Saturday September 8, 11:00am-2:00pm, demonstration: Rise for Climate to Build a Fossil Free world. Milan Park, 500 W. Commerce.

Wednesday September 12, 12:00pm-1:00pm, anti-death penalty vigil across the street from county courthouse, 300 Dolorosa.

Wednesday September 12, 7:00pm-9:00pm, Anthony Graves, author of *Infinite Hope: How Wrongful Conviction, Solitary Confinement, and 12 Years on Death Row Failed to Kill My Soul*. Concert Hall, University of the Incarnate Word, 4301 Broadway.

Wednesday September 12, 7:00pm-9:00pm, Pub theology with Carry Clark. The Friendly Spot, 943 S. Alamo St.

Wednesday September 12, 7:00pm-9:00pm, Joseph L. Cook, "Climate Change and Ecological Spirituality." Sol Center, University Presbyterian Church, 300 Bushnell (park off Shook). Free, but register by September 5: 210-732-9927, or see <http://www.upcsa.org/classes/>

Monday September 17, 1:00pm-Tuesday September 18, 5:00pm, "2018 Mayor's Housing Summit." For program, see <https://www.sanantonio.gov/Housing-Summit>. Henry B. Gonzales Convention Center, 900 E. Market. Tickets: \$30-\$55.

Wednesday September 19, 7:00pm, Kenneth R. Miller, Ph.D. (Biology Dept., Brown University), "Darwin, God, and the Cosmos: Is Faith Still Relevant in a Scientific World?" University Center, Conference Room A, St. Mary's University, One Camino Santa Maria.

Friday September 21, 6:00pm-**Saturday September 22**, 6:00pm. "Cesar Chavez: Faith Seeking Justice." Oblate Spirituality and Social Justice Institute. \$60.00. Whitley Theological Center, Oblate School of Theology, 285 Oblate Dr. Information and registration: Noemy, (210) 341-1366, ext. 212.

Wednesday September 26, 12:00pm-1:00pm, anti-death penalty vigil across the street from county courthouse, 300 Dolorosa.

Thursday September 27, 12:00pm-1:00pm, anti-death penalty vigil across the street from county courthouse, 300 Dolorosa.

Thursday October 4, 7:00pm-9:00pm, Edward B. Westermann, Ph.D. (Texas A & M San Antonio), "Propaganda: The Dangers of Dehumanization." SoL Center, University Presbyterian Church, 300 Bushnell (park off Shook). \$15; register by September 27 (\$20 after): 210-732-9927, or see <http://www.upcsa.org/classes/>

Tuesday October 9, 7:00pm-9:00pm, Lisa Epstein (Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America), Gun Myths Busted. SoL Center, University Presbyterian Church, 300 Bushnell (park off Shook). \$15, register before October 2, \$20 after: 210-732-9927, or see <http://www.upcsa.org/classes/>

Wednesday November 7, 7:00pm, John F. Haught, Ph.D. (Theology Dept., Georgetown University), "Evolution ad Faith: What Is at Stake?" University Center, Conference Room A, St. Mary's University, One Camino Santa Maria.

Second Reading (James 1:17-18, 21B-22, 27)

The reading is from the *Letter of James*. Who this James was is unclear. Since Christian writings were often published under pseudonyms because Christianity was illegal, we do not know even whether James was the author's real name. There was an early Christian community in Jerusalem called the Brothers of the Lord, which was eventually scattered; the author may well have once been a member of it. Or the author may have been writing under the name of that community's leader, James. Internal evidence in the letter—really an essay—suggests it was not written in Jerusalem.

The letter consists of exhortations, each accompanied by an explanation. The selection in the Lectionary for today has several of these exhortations, taken from Chapter 1. While the reading begins at verse 17, it is necessary to begin at verse 16 to get the complete thought: "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers and sisters. Every good act of giving and every perfect gift is from above...." The verb "deceive" is *planao*, from which our word *planet* comes. In speaking of God's guidance, the author contrasts being misled by setting course with a planet, and being guided correctly by using the stars and sun as guides: "coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, from Whom there is no change of course or shadow of relocation."

The selection includes a few more verses, and then skips to this: "Religion pure and undefiled before God and Father is this: looking after orphans and widows in their difficulty, keeping oneself unblemished from the world."

Third Reading(Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

The reading is the familiar narrative of Pharisees and scribes criticizing Jesus' disciples for eating loaves with defiled hands. The Church editors delete Jesus' criticism of his critics, that they had traditions that undermined their own disciples' divinely-mandated duty toward parents. The liturgical editors include Jesus making a pronouncement: "There is nothing outside a person that going into one can make one impure. However, that going out of a person is what defiles a person." Then they delete Jesus's disciples not understanding the pronouncement, but go straight to the explanation: "...for out from the heart of people come evil discourses, acts of fornication and of theft, of murder, of adultery, of greed, of knavery, deceit, licentiousness, curses, defamation, contempt, senselessness. All these evil things come from within and defile the person." The Church editors simplified the story-line, but the Sunday parishioner is deprived of the point about human traditions and Christians' propensity to miss the point.

Gene was an insightful though laconic old scholar, gruff in his mannerisms but attentive to ethical matters and careful to pay attention respectfully to everyone. He doubted the sufficiency of toleration and charity and argued for the priority of justice. I knew him as someone often present at the professional association meetings I attended. By chance I came across a slim volume in a used book store, Gene's autobiography. The promo line said he was a Holocaust survivor; I hadn't known that about him.

Gene's home town was in present-day Ukraine, but national borders kept shifting. The vicissitudes of geopolitics put the city in no less than three nations during his childhood. Jews were actually in the majority in the city, but because his father believed in modern education and sent Gene to a school conducted in spoken Hebrew, hence "contaminating" the sacred language with modern uses, most of the neighbors were suspicious of Gene and his immediate family.

At one point a contingent of Hungarian soldiers arrived to establish a new national governance. The mayor assembled a brass band and a host of dignitaries to welcome their new rulers. The mayor gave his welcoming speech in Czech, one of the languages of their past rulers. The puzzled general didn't understand. The mayor repeated his speech in German, the hegemonic language of central Europe. The general still did not understand. The mayor then repeated his remarks in French, the language of diplomacy. The general grumbled something. Someone interpreted: "He said that these ignorant people don't even understand Hungarian." The band played, and the dignitaries shook the general's hand.

When, eventually, the Nazis came, most of the people were arrested and taken away. The better part of Gene's family and childhood friends disappeared; only imprecise rumors suggested what became of them. Gene and his father were sent to a

work site as slave labor. Then they were force-marched toward another concentration camp. They succeeded, separately, in escaping en route, and at the end of the war were allowed to return to their home town, albeit through the good offices of different displaced persons agencies. They reunited, but Gene's father wanted to stay and spent much of the rest of his life living under Communism. Gene was allowed to go to America on the pretext of having distant relatives in St. Louis, but the relatives actually wanted little to do with him. He supported himself as a Torah educator for a small-town synagogue that did not have a real rabbi. He also discovered university opportunities and earned a doctorate. Thus began a second life for him.

Why was the mayor who spoke three European languages as well as Yiddish considered ignorant? Why were Gene and his classmates in the Hebrew-speaking school disapproved of by other Jews? Why were the family and neighbors taken off to unknown fates by the Nazis? Why were Gene and his father reduced to slave labor and force-marched around Germany? Is all this "ancient history"? Why are mothers and children detained at international borders? Why does a Florida gun store owner, backed by a Confederate Battle Flag, declare his store a "Muslim free zone"? Why does a "white" policeman in a cruiser tailgate an African American woman, and when she moves over to make way for him pull her over "for not signaling a lane change," and then provoke her so that he could arrest her? We later learned the whole experience added to other problems led her to hang herself. Questions need not be limited to what appears in the press. One can ask questions about behavior observed in everyday life.

"Why do your disciples not follow the traditions of the elders, but eat bread with defiled hands?"

And he answered, "Setting aside the commandments of God, you seize upon human traditions." All too human, and not unique to Pharisees and scribes.

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In Lieu of a Poem

Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio (The story revised.)

The story goes that Francis and some companions in their wayfaring ways spent a few months in the village of Gubbio. With traditional hospitality, the villagers welcomed them to their homes and tables. However, one thing troubled the people: a mix of fear and anger that strangled much of their joy in life. Their chickens, lambs and sheep were being killed, one by one, because of a wolf that haunted their woods. Hunts and traps for the wolf always failing.

After reflecting on this, Francis went into the woods expecting to happen upon the wolf himself. Amid the trees, he found a grass covered clearing where he sat down to meditate and wait. After some hours, Francis gradually began to feel, welling up within himself, a Presence that enveloped him, the woods, the villagers and then the wolf all together and at peace.

Within minutes, Francis felt himself being watched. Moving only his eyes to scan the edges of the clearing, he saw the wolf. They held eye-to-eye contact. Soon the wolf came into the clearing and hunkered down holding eye contact with Francis.

Thus, they stayed beholding each other. His thoughts rambling, Francis became aware he was getting hungry. Something he shared with the wolf. Francis mused how all life hungers for life and that all life feeds life. In that, he and the wolf were one. Soon, the wolf rose and walked half-way to Francis, paused and returned to the woods. With that, Francis walked back to Gubbio and its people. It was dusk, night came.

The next evening, Francis had his companions invite the village families to gather in the market square to consider their thoughts on the wolf, her hunger and theirs. After sharing feelings and beliefs, the people reflected in silence. A girl, sitting on her mother's lap, spoke up. "Maybe, we can share our food with the wolf."

Some talk followed. An agreement came. Over the next few years, the families came to know the wolf as one slowed by age, where mice and rabbits out ran her. Now they understood.

One day, the wolf did not come to the evening feeding. Villagers searched for her and found her body. They buried it. The children passed on the story to their children.

Tom Keene
April 17, 2018

The Prosperity Gospel: Dangerous and Different

La Civiltà Cattolica, July 18, 2018

Antonio Spadaro, SJ - Marcelo Figueroa

The “prosperity gospel” is a well-known theological current emerging from the neo-Pentecostal evangelical movements. At its heart is the belief that God wants his followers to have a prosperous life, that is, to be rich, healthy and happy. This type of Christianity places the well-being of the believer at the center of prayer, and turns God the Creator into someone who makes the thoughts and desires of believers come true.

The risk of this form of religious anthropocentrism, which puts humans and their well-being at the center, is that it transforms God into a power at our service, the Church into a supermarket of faith, and religion into a utilitarian phenomenon that is eminently sensationalist and pragmatic.

This image of prosperity and well-being, as we will see in a moment, relates to the so-called “American Dream.” It is not the same thing, just a reductive interpretation. In and of itself, this dream is the vision of a land and a society understood as a place of open opportunity. Historically, through the centuries, this has been the motivation pushing many economic migrants to leave their own land and set out for the United States to stake a claim to a place where work produces results that were unreachable in their old world.

The prosperity gospel mechanically translates this vision into religious terms, as though opulence and well-being were the true signs of divine delight to be conquered magically by faith. In recent decades this “theology” has spread across the world thanks

to massive media campaigns by evangelical movements and ministries, especially neo-charismatic ones.

The aim of our reflection is to illustrate and evaluate the phenomenon, which is used as a theological justification for economic neo-liberalism. In conclusion, we will see how Pope Francis has often warned against the perils of this theology that can “overshadow the Gospel of Christ.”^[11]

Spread around the world

The prosperity gospel has spread not only in the United States where it was born, but also in Africa, especially Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa. In Kampala there is a giant covered stadium called the Miracle Center Cathedral, which cost 7 million dollars to build. It is the fruit of the work of Pastor Robert Kayanja, who has also developed a vast movement with a strong media presence.

In Asia, too, the prosperity gospel has had a notable impact, especially in India and South Korea. The 1980s saw a strong indigenous movement in South Korea tied to this theological current, promoted by Pastor Paul Yonggi Cho. He preached a theology of the “fourth dimension” where believers, through visions and dreams, would be able to take control of reality and obtain all sorts of immanent prosperity.^[21]

We can also see it rooted in the People’s Republic of China thanks to the “Churches of Wenzhou.” Wenzhou is a large Eastern port in the province of Zhejiang, where great red crosses appeared on many buildings. They usually indicate the presence of a “Wenzhou Church,” which is a community originating from various local businessmen and tied to the prosperity gospel movement.^[31]

In Latin America, this theology spread and propagated itself exponentially after 1980, even if its roots there can be traced to the 1940s and 1950s. This religious phenomenon translates, from the point of view of media, in the use of television by very charismatic pastors who have a simple and direct message, theatrically staged with shows of music and testimony, and fundamentalist and pragmatic readings of the Bible.

In Central America, we see that Guatemala and Costa Rica have probably become the main bastions of this religious current. In Guatemala there was the determining presence of the charismatic leader Carlos Enrique Luna Arango, nicknamed “Cash Luna.” Costa Rica is the home of the evangelical satellite television channel *TBN-Enlace*.

In South America, the most significant diffusion took place in Colombia, Chile and Argentina, but Brazil also deserves a special mention as it possesses its own dynamic and indigenous Pentecostal movement in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. This group, also known by the name “Stop Suffering,” has branches across Latin America. It has kept an intermediary language somewhere between Spanish and Portuguese that gives it a peculiar type of carefully studied communication. Suffice it to analyze the proclamation of the Brazilian Universal Church to find a strong message of prosperity and well-being, tied to personal visits to the temples in order to receive multiple benefits.

This “gospel” is spread by a strong presence in the main media and is sustained by its powerful influence over political life.

The origins of the movement and the American Dream

If we look for the origins of these theological currents, we find them in the United States where the majority of those doing research into the American religious phenomenology trace them to the New York Pastor Esek William Kenyon (1867-1948). He maintained that through the power of faith you can change what is concrete and real. A direct conclusion of this belief is that faith can lead to riches, health and well-being, while lack of faith leads to poverty, sickness and unhappiness.

The origins of the prosperity gospel are actually complex, but here we look at the most important roots, referring the reader to the specialist essays and publications for further detail. Theologian Kate Ward, for example, has written about the influence of Adam Smith, especially his “theory of moral sentiments.”^[4] Ward shows how for Smith compassion is not related to the poor, but invokes admiration for those who have a success story.

These doctrines have connected to and imbibed significantly the world of positive thinking, an indicator of the American way of life. In this way they connect to the “exceptional position” that Alexis de Tocqueville in his famous *Democracy in America* (1831) attributed to the Americans, to the extent they can “believe that no democratic people will ever reach a position similar” to their own. Tocqueville even affirmed that this way of life shapes the religion of the Americans.

Sometimes American authorities themselves prove this link.^[5] In his State of the Union Address on January 30, 2018, President Donald Trump stated, in order to describe the identity of the country: “Together, we are rediscovering the American way.” And he went on: “In America, we know that faith and family, not government and bureaucracy, are the center of the American life. Our motto is ‘in God we trust.’ And we celebrate our police, our military, and our amazing veterans as heroes who deserve our total and unwavering support.” In just a few lines we see God, the army and the American Dream.^[6]

The megachurches and the different Gospel

A fundamental impulse to these ideas of the prosperity gospel comes from the so-called Word of Faith movement, whose main mentor was the pastor and self-styled prophet Kenneth Hagin (1917-2003). Among Hagin’s distinguishing characteristics were his recurrent visions that inspired him to make a unique interpretation of some of the Bible’s most well-known texts. See, for example, the case of Mark 11:23-24: “Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you. So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” These two verses for Hagin were the pillars of the prosperity gospel.

He states that to translate miraculous faith into works it must be without uncertainties, especially concerning the impossible things: you have to declare specifically the miracle and believe that you will get it in the way imagined. Hagin also emphasized another aspect: the fact that the desired miracle has to be considered as already conceded, that is, its coming into being has to move from the future to the past.

Both Kenyon and Hagin understood that mass media are fundamental instruments for the rapid spread of their teaching. The former used it in his own show *Kenyon’s Church of the Air*, the latter in his program *Faith Seminar of the Air*.

There are some preachers that we can note as following in the theological tradition of Kenyon and Hagin with their communications strategy. The first is Kenneth Copeland – anointed by Hagin as his successor – and his television program *Believer's Voice of Victory*, which spread those doctrines around the world. In the same way, Norman Vincent Peale (1889-1993), pastor of the Marble Collegiate Church in New York, gained an enormous following with his books whose titles speak for themselves: *The Power of Positive Thinking, You Can If You Think You Can, A Guide to Confident Living*. Peale was a successful preacher and managed to mix marketing and preaching.

In the United States millions of people regularly go to the megachurches that spread the prosperity gospel. The preachers, prophets and apostles who have joined this branch of neo-Pentecostalism have taken up more and more important posts in the mass media, published an enormous quantity of books that have rapidly become best-sellers, and given speeches that are often transmitted to millions of people via the internet and social media.

Names such as Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Benny Hinn, Robert Tilton, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer and others have increased their popularity and wealth thanks to their focus on knowing this gospel, emphasizing it and pushing it to its limits. Joyce Meyer says that her television program "Enjoying Everyday Life" reaches two-thirds of the world through radio and television and is translated into 38 languages.^[7]

What is absolutely clear is that the economic, media and political power of these groups – which we generically call "evangelicals of the American Dream" – makes them more visible than the other evangelical churches, even those of the classical Pentecostal variety. In addition, their growth is exponential and directly proportional to the economic, physical and spiritual benefits they promise their followers: all these blessings are far removed from the life of conversion usually taught by the traditional evangelical movements.

Although they have come out of and then crossed through different denominations, these movements have been harshly criticized by groups of charismatic Churches that have maintained their evangelical religious nature based on miracles, prophecies and signs. Many evangelical sectors, both traditional (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian) and more recent, have harshly criticized these movements, even calling what they preach a "different gospel."^[8]

Economic well-being and health

The pillars of the prosperity gospel, as we have mentioned, are essentially two: economic well-being and health. This accentuation is the fruit of a literalist exegesis of some biblical texts that are taken within a reductionist hermeneutic. The Holy Spirit is limited to a power placed at the service of individual well-being. Jesus Christ has abandoned his role as Lord and transformed into being a debtor to each one of his words. The Father is reduced to being "a sort of cosmic bellhop that responds to the needs and desires of his creatures."^[9]

For the preachers of this gospel, the "word of faith" they pronounce takes over the role that the Bible traditionally held as the norm of faith and morals in the evangelical movement, even raising it to the power and effect of the apostolic word of the "anointed one." Speaking in the name of God directly, concretely and specifically

gives the “positive word” a creative sense they consider capable of making things happen, if those who are present do not block it with their lack of faith.

At the same time, they teach that, being a matter of a “confession of faith,” the followers are responsible with their words for whatever happens to them, be they blessings or curses, economically or physically, in terms of generation or spirituality. A refrain that many of these pastors use is “There is a miracle in your mouth.” The miraculous process is the following: visualize in detail what you want, declare it expressly with your mouth, claim it with the faith and authority of God and consider it already received. Effectively, “claiming” the promises of God, which have been extracted from the biblical texts or the prophetic word of the pastor, places the believer in a dominant position with respect to a God who is imprisoned by his own word, as perceived and believed by the faithful.

The theme of *health* also has a key role in the prosperity gospel. In these doctrines, it is one’s own mind that has to concentrate on the supposed biblical laws, which then produce the desired power through the tongue. There is the belief, for example, that a sick person, without turning to a doctor, can be healed by concentrating and pronouncing in the present or past tense biblical phrases or prayers inspired by the Scriptures. One of the phrases used in this way is “By the wounds of Christ I have already been healed.” These would be the words, in their opinion, that could unblock the divine benediction that would heal them in that very moment.

Obviously, sad and disastrous events, including natural ones, or tragedies such as those of migrants and others in similar situations do not offer winning narratives that help to keep the faithful tied to the thought of the prosperity gospel. This is why there can be a lack of empathy and solidarity in these cases from its followers. There can be no compassion for those who are not prosperous, for clearly they have not followed the rules and thus live in failure and are not loved by God.

A God of covenants and seeds

One of the characteristics of these movements is the emphasis placed on the covenant written by God with his people, his witnesses in the Bible. And above all they look to the alliance with the patriarchs. So the text of the alliance with Abraham has a central place, in the sense of guaranteed prosperity. The logic of this concept of “the God of the covenants” is that, as Christians are the spiritual children of Abraham, they are also the inheritors of the material rights, the financial blessings and the earthly territorial lands. Rather than a biblical alliance, it sounds like a contract.

Kenneth Copeland wrote in his book *The Laws of Prosperity* that, as the deal with God was established and prosperity is one of the results of that agreement, believers should be aware that they now have a right to prosperity.^[10]

In these theologies, the filial belonging of Christians as children of God is reinterpreted as that of “Children of the King”: sonship that brings rights and privileges, especially material ones to those who recognize and preach it. Harold Hill, in his book *How to be a Winner*, wrote: “King’s kids are entitled to receive special treatment because they have a firsthand winning relationship with their heavenly Father who has made all things and continues to be Lord of all.”^[11]

Another central concept in this theology, intimately connected to the preceding one, is the principle of sowing seeds. The classic text is that of Galatians 6:7 “Do not be

deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.” And there is also Mark 10:29-30 where Jesus said to Peter, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life.”

Material, physical and spiritual prosperity finds one of its favored texts in the Third Letter of John: “Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul” (verse 2). In the Old Testament, the reference text is Deuteronomy 28:1-14.

The passages are interpreted in such a way as to serve a purpose. For example, in the book *God’s Will is Prosperity* the preacher Gloria Copeland writes, referring to the donations for ministries such as hers: “Give a dollar for love of the gospel and you’ll get one hundred; give ten dollars and you’ll get a thousand as a gift. Give one airplane and receive one hundred times the value of the airplane. Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars. In short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal.”^[12]

When all is said and done, the spiritual principle of the seed and the harvest, in this evangelical interpretation that takes it completely out of context, states that giving is above all an economic act that is measured in terms of return on investment. What is forgotten, though, is found immediately after Galatians 6:7, in verse 8, where Paul writes: “If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.”

Pragmatism and the pride of success

The gospel we have described is easily imbibed in today’s societies, where the legitimacy of the supernatural requires some sort of real verification. The pragmatism of success needs simple propositions of faith. The need for a prosperous life without suffering fits in with a client-centered, made-to-measure religiosity, and the *kairos* of the God of history gives way to the frenetic *kronos* of the real world. When all is said and done we are speaking here of a God who is made in the image and likeness of the people and their situation, and not according to the biblical model. In some societies where meritocracy has coincided with the socio-economic level without any concern given to the enormous differences in opportunity, this “Gospel,” which puts the accent on the faith as a “merit” to climb the social ladder, is unjust and radically anti-evangelical.

Generally, the fact that there are riches and material benefits fall once again on the exclusive responsibility of the believer, and consequently so too their poverty or lack of goods. Material victory places the believer in a position of pride due to the power of their “faith.” On the contrary, poverty hits them with a blow that is unbearable for two reasons: first, the person thinks their faith is unable to move the providential hands of God; second, their miserable situation is a divine imposition, a relentless punishment to be accepted in submission.

A theology of the American Dream?

This theology clearly serves the economic-political-philosophical concepts of a neo-liberal model. One of the conclusions made by exponents of this theological

tradition is geopolitical and economic in nature, and tied to the place of origin of the prosperity gospel. It leads to the conclusion that the United States has grown as a nation under the blessing of the providential God of the Evangelical movement. Meanwhile, those who dwell south of the Rio Grande are sinking in poverty because the Catholic Church has a different, opposed vision exalting poverty. From political connotations, it is even possible to verify the link between these positions and the integralist and fundamentalist temptations.^[13]

In truth, one of the serious problems that the prosperity gospel brings is its perverse effect on the poor. In fact, it not only exasperates individualism and knocks down the sense of solidarity, but it pushes people to adopt a miracle-centered outlook, because faith alone – not social or political commitment – can procure prosperity. So the risk is that the poor who are fascinated by this pseudo-Gospel remain dazzled in a socio-political emptiness that easily allows other forces to shape their world, making them innocuous and defenseless. The prosperity gospel is not a cause of real change, a fundamental aspect of the vision that is innate to the social doctrine of the Church.

While Max Weber spoke of the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism in the context of evangelical austerity, the prosperity gospel theologians spread the idea of riches in proportional relation to personal faith. Without any social sense, and framed within an experience of individual benefit, this conception knowingly or unknowingly gives an extremist rereading of Calvinistic theologies of predestination. Soteriology is somehow anchored in time and place and is emptied of its traditional eschatological vision. Hence, in the Protestant sphere, many who follow traditional theology look with distrust and even with harsh criticism at the progress of these theologies, which many associate with “new age” and expressions of magic mysticism.

Salvation is not a theology of prosperity

Since the beginning of his pontificate Francis has been aware of the “different gospel” of prosperity theology and, criticizing it, has applied the classical social doctrine of the Church. He has often spoken about it to warn about its dangers. The first time was in Brazil, July 28, 2013. Speaking to the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean he singled out ecclesial functionalism that “applies a sort of prosperity gospel to the organization of pastoral work.” This ends up being concerned with efficacy, success, quantifiable results and good statistics. The Church ends up being run like a business in a misleading way that keeps people away from the mystery of faith.

Speaking again to bishops, this time in Korea in August 2014, Francis quoted Paul (1 Cor 11:17) and James (2:1-7) who rebuked the Churches that were living in such a way as to make the poor feel unwelcome. “This is a prosperity temptation,” Francis commented. And he went on: “Be careful, because yours is a Church which is prospering, a great missionary Church, a great Church. The devil must not be allowed to sow these weeds, this temptation to remove the poor from very prophetic structure of the Church and to make you become an affluent Church for the affluent, a Church of the well-to-do – perhaps not to the point of developing a ‘theology of prosperity’ – but a Church of mediocrity.”

References to the prosperity gospel are also seen in the daily homilies of Francis at Santa Marta. On February 5, 2015, the pope said clearly that “salvation is not a theology of prosperity” but “a gift, the same gift that Jesus had received to give.” And

the power of the Gospel is that of “chasing the impure spirits to liberate them, to heal them.” Jesus “does not give the power to make great business.” Francis repeated this again at Santa Marta on May 19, 2016. Some, he said, believe “in what is called the prosperity gospel, that is, God shows you that you are right if he gives you great riches.” But that “is wrong.” This is why the Psalmist says “Do not set your heart on riches.” To make himself clearer, the pope recalled the gospel passage of the “rich young man that Jesus loved because he was just”: he “was good, but had set his heart on riches and these riches eventually became chains for him and stopped him from being free to follow Jesus.”

The vision of faith offered by the prosperity gospel is in clear contradiction to the concept of a humanity marked by sin with a need for eschatological salvation, tied to Jesus Christ as savior and not to the success of its own works. It embodies a peculiar form of Pelagianism against which Francis has asked us to be alert. As he wrote in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, there are Christians who are committed to following the path of “justification by their own efforts, the worship of the human will and their own abilities. The result is a self-centered and elitist complacency, bereft of true love. This finds expression in a variety of apparently unconnected ways of thinking and acting,” among them “an excessive concern with programs of self-help and personal fulfillment” (No. 57).

The prosperity gospel also gives voice to another of the great heresies of our time, namely Gnosticism. It affirms that reality can be changed by the powers of the mind. This is particularly clear, for example, in the work and great influence of Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) in the Church and movement of Christian Science. As Francis writes in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, by its very nature Gnosticism wants to tame the mystery of God and his grace. Gnostics “use religion for their own purposes, to promote their own psychological or intellectual theories.” Instead, “God infinitely transcends us; he is full of surprises. We are not the ones to determine when and how we will encounter him.” A faith used to manipulate reality, mentally and psychically, “presumes to control God’s transcendence” (No. 41).

* * *

The prosperity gospel is a far cry from the invitation of St. Paul in 2 Cor 8:9-15: “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (8:9). And it is also a far cry from the positive and enlightening prophecy of the American Dream that has inspired many. The prosperity gospel is far from the “missionary dream” of the American pioneers, and further still from the message of preachers like Martin Luther King and the social, inclusive and revolutionary content of his memorable talk: “I have a dream.”

^[1] Cf. D. W. Jones – R. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth & Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?*, Grand Rapids (MI), Kregel, 2010.

^[2] Cho was condemned for stealing around 15 million euro from Church accounts, which he used to cover his family's losses on the stock market.

- ^[3]. Cf. K. Attanasi – A. Yong, *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2011. Cf. T. Meynard – M. Chambon, *The Aggiornamento of the Catholic Church in China*, Civ. Catt. English ed. March 2018 pp. 93-101; P. Wu, *Reasons Why Prosperity Theology Floods in China*, in http://chinachristiandaily.com/news/category/2016-11-03/reasons-why-prosperity-theology-floods-in-china_3103.
- ^[4]. K. Ward, 'Mere Poverty Excites Little Compassion': Adam Smith, *Moral Judgment and the Poor*, in *The Heythrop Journal*, March 2015, in <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/heyj.12260> Cf. *Ibid.*, "Porters to Heaven Wealth, the Poor, and Moral Agency in Augustine," in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, April 2014, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jore.12054>. Here Ward also states that the roots of what we call the prosperity gospel are ancient and that it was known at the time of Augustine who opposed this vision.
- ^[5]. Cf. *Why Evangelicals love Donald Trump: The secret lies in the prosperity Gospel*, in *The Economist*, May 18, 2017; *Experts Discuss Role of 'Prosperity Gospel' in Trump's Success*, in *The Harvard Crimson*, October 24, 2017; P. Feuerherd, *Does the 'Prosperity Gospel' Explain Trump?*, in *Jstor Daily*, May 1, 2017.
- ^[6]. During the annual National Prayer Breakfast, February 2018, Trump, linking his country to the American Dream of freedom, heroism and courage, defined the United States as a light unto all nations. "As long as we open our eyes to God's grace and open our hearts to God's love, then America will forever be the land of the free, the home of the brave, and a light unto all nations." This quote reflects a biblical prophecy of the restorative and messianic role of Israel, the chosen people and the great and prosperous nation that was the dream of the patriarchs: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (*Isaiah 49:6*).
- ^[7]. We recall too that the inauguration ceremony for the presidential mandate of Donald Trump included prayers from prosperity gospel preachers like Paula White, one of his spiritual advisors. In October 2015 White organized a meeting at Trump Tower for televangelists connected to the prosperity gospel. They prayed for the current president, laying their hands on him. The video is here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ18exdhR6I>
- ^[8]. Cf. D. R. McConnell, *A Different Gospel: Biblical and Historical Insights Into the Word of Faith Movement*, Peabody (MA), Hendrickson, 1988.
- ^[9]. J. Goff, *The Faith that Claims*, in *Christianity Today*, n. 34, February 1990, 21.
- ^[10]. Cf. K. Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity*, Tulsa (OK), Harrison House, 1974.
- ^[11]. H. Hill, *How to be a Winner*, Alachua (FL), Bridge Logos, 1976.
- ^[12]. G. Copeland, *God's Will is Prosperity*, Tulsa (OK), Harrison House, 1978.
- ^[13]. Cf. A. Spadaro – M. Figueroa, *Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism: A Surprising Ecumenism*, in Civ. Catt. English Edition, July 13, 2017, <https://laciviltacattolica.com/evangelical-fundamentalism-and-catholic-integralism-in-the-usa-a-surprising-ecumenism>.

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Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, International JPIC Committee
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