The Prosperity Gospel: Dangerous and Different

The “prosperity gospel” is a well-known theological current emerging from the neo-Pentecostal evangelical movements. At its heart is the idea that faith can lead to riches, health, and well-being, while lack of faith leads to poverty, sickness, and unhappiness.

This image of prosperity and well-being, as we will see in a moment, relates to the so-called “American Dream.” It is not accidental that it is the United States which in the 1920s launched a vision of a country where all “capitalists” could develop their individual potential thanks to the opportunities the country offered.

The risk of this form of religious anthropocentrism, which puts humans and their well-being at the center, is that it reduces God to a kind of “oceanographer,” turns prayer into a form of therapy, turns God the Creator into someone who makes the thoughts and desires of believers come true.

The prosperity gospel mechanically translates this vision into religious terms, as though opulence and well-being were the inevitable result of faith. This image has spread around 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 the fulfillment of personal needs and the transformation of human beings. We will see how Pope Francis has often warned against the perils of this theology that can “overshadow the Gospel of Christ.”

The prosperity gospel has spread not only in the United States where it was born, but also in Africa, especially Nigeria, which 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 proliferation of this movement, as well as an increase in the number of cases in which people believed that they could control reality and obtain all sorts of immanent prosperity through visions and dreams, would be able to take control of reality and obtain all sorts of immanent prosperity.

We can also see it rooted in the People’s Republic of China thanks to the “Churches of Wenzhou.” Wenzhou is a large Chinese city where most of the Chinese Christians live, and which is the home of the Wenzhou Theological Seminary, a community originating from various local businessmen and tied to the prosperity gospel movement.

In Latin America, this theology spread and propagated itself exponentially after 1980, even if its roots there can be traced back to the 1920s. It is interesting to observe how this message, theatrically staged with shows of music and testimony, and fundamentalist and pragmatic readings of the Bible, has spread in Central America, where Guatemala and Costa Rica have probably become the main bastions of this religious movement.

In South America, the most significant diffusion took place in Colombia, Chile, and Argentina, but Brazil also deserves a mention of its own. The prosperity gospel has found fertile ground in Brazil, where it is spread by a strong presence in the main media and is sustained by its powerful influence over political life.

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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 who adopted them were of African origin. It is no coincidence that the majority of those who adopted this theological current were blacks who felt they were the first to experience the effects of racial discrimination.

The origins of the prosperity gospel are actually complex, but here we look at the most important roots, referring to the influence of the American philosopher and political economist Adam Smith.

Smith was one of the most influential philosophers of the Enlightenment, and his works have had a profound influence on the prosperity gospel. In particular, his “Theory of Moral Sentiments” is a fundamental text for understanding the idea that faith can lead to riches, health, and well-being.

Kate Ward, for example, has written about the influence of Adam Smith, especially his “theory of moral sentiments.” 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 striving for individual success. Tocqueville even affirmed that this way of life shapes the religion of the Americans.

Sometimes American authorities themselves prove this link. In his State of the Union Address on January 30, 2018, President Donald Trump stated, in order to describe the identity of the American, he used “American Dream” and “heroes.” In just a few lines we see God, the army and the American Dream.

The megachurches and the different Gospel movements. A fundamental impulse to these ideas of the prosperity gospel comes from the so-called Word of Faith movement, whose main representative is Kenneth Copeland. The prosperity gospel is based on the Bible verses of Mark 11:24, which says: “Therefore all things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will receive.” 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 miraculous meanings. According to Copeland, the 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 messages of success and prosperity. The most famous one of these is the Reverend Franklin Graham who wrote a book called 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 prosperity gospel has become very popular in recent decades, especially in large cities, with names such as Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Benny Hinn, Robert Tilton, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer and others. Their messages are transmitted to millions of people via radio, television, books and speeches that are often transmitted to millions of people via the internet and social media.

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Names such as Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Benny Hinn, Robert Tilton, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer and others have increased their influence on society. In the United States, the prosperity gospel is being spread by many organizations and media, reaching millions of people through radio and television and is translated into 38 languages.

What is absolutely clear is that the economic, media and political power of these groups – which we generically call “megachurches of prosperity” – is enormous. These groups have managed to influence the perception of prosperity in society, and to influence the economic, media and political decision-making processes in the United States.

Although they have come out of and then crossed through different denominations, these movements have been harshly criticized by traditional evangelicals. These movements have been accused of having a “different gospel” that differs from the traditional evangelical message.

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For the preachers of this gospel, the “word of faith” they pronounce takes over the role that the Bible traditionally assigns to the faith of the believers. In the prosperity gospel, the faith of the believers is not a means to an end, but the end itself. The faith of the believers is the source of all blessings, and the more faith one has, the more blessings one will receive.

At the same time, they teach that, being a matter of a “confession of faith,” the followers are responsible with their health and prosperity. In these movements, the followers are asked to confess their faith in order to receive the blessings of God. The more one confesses their faith, the more one will receive the blessings of God.

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 be the one that makes the blessings happen. In these movements, the health of the believers is not a matter of chance, but of faith. The health of the believers is the result of their faith in God and in the power of their own thoughts.

Obviously, sad and disastrous events, including natural ones, or tragedies such as those of migrants and others in the United States, can happen. In these movements, these events are seen as failures of the believers, who have not followed the rules of faith and have not received the blessings of 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 children. In the prosperity gospel, the covenant is seen as a contract between God and his people, in which God promises to give them prosperity and health in exchange for their faith.

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.

In these theologies, the filial belonging of Christians as children of God is reinterpreted as that of “Children of the Arbiter,” that is, with a firsthand winning relationship with their heavenly Father who has made all things and continues to be Lord of all.

Another central concept in this theology, intimately connected to the preceding one, is the principle of sowing seeds. In the prosperity gospel, sowing seeds means that one has to make faithful decisions in order to receive the blessings of God. The sower is the one who makes the decision, and the reaper is the one who receives the blessings.

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The passages are interpreted in such a way as to serve a purpose. For example, in the book *God's Will is Prosperity* the author claims that one who gives up one car will have a lifetime of cars. Mark 10:30 is a very good deal.

When all is said and done, the spiritual principle of the seed and the harvest, in this evangelical interpretation that seeks to find the means to obtain the maximum profit from the minimum investment, means nothing other than to acquire eternal life as a result of having sown to 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 a path to success, and the lion's share of people believe in it. The influence of the culture of success, 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 individual. The difficulty is that the Christian must fight a double battle: first, to understand that the riches 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 drawn from this situation is that in America the issue of success is far from a social or religious narrative. It is even possible to verify the link between these positions and the integralist and fundamentalist temptations.

In truth, one of the serious problems that the prosperity gospel brings is its perverse effect on the poor. In fact, it 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, this fact is usually criticized 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, therefore, he rejects it. In fact, the Church does not offer a theology of prosperity; it offers a theology of the kingdom that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, makes faith a reality that causes changes in the world.

Speaking again to bishops, this time in Korea in August 2014, Francis quoted Paul (1 Cor 11:17) and James (2:1-7) who criticized those who consider their lives as a religious experience. To him he said: "If you have only money and no faith, it is useless. If you have only faith and no money, it is useless, but if you have faith and money, you are a well-to-do – perhaps not to the point of developing a 'theology of prosperity' – but a Church of mediocrity."

The vision of faith offered by the prosperity gospel is in clear contradiction to the concept of a humanity marked by sin and death, a humanity that is in constant search for a transcendence, not a humanity that is satisfied with its own achievements, but a humanity that is open to receive the word of God and be transformed by it.

The prosperity gospel also gives voice to another of the great heresies of our time, namely Gnosticism. It affirms that the human mind is superior to the material realm and that the spiritual world is where the true reality lies. This is the "heavenly" world, the world of the gods, and this world is superior to the material world, which is "hell".

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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, how you have imitated the generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ. For it is in a generous act that one's faith is made complete, and that the value of one's heart is shown."

References to the prosperity gospel are also seen in the daily homilies of Francis at Santa Marta. On February 5, 2015, Francis quoted from the Gospel of Matthew (16:24) and said: "A person who has a heart on riches and these riches eventually become chains for him and stop him from being free to follow Jesus."
During the annual National Prayer Breakfast, February 2018, Trump, linking his country to the American Dream of a great nation and a great people, said: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

We recall too that the inauguration ceremony for the presidential mandate of Donald Trump included prayers from leaders of various religious traditions. A video of them laying their hands on him can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ18exdhR6I


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