

RENATA SIUDA-AMBROZIAK*
University of Warsaw
Institute of the Americas and Europe
American Studies Center

“Health and wealth” in contemporary Brazilian religious culture

Abstract: The various connections between financial, physical, and mental health are often visible: health (physical and mental) can have an outsized impact on one’s financial life. The reverse is also true: financial well-being and socioeconomic status are often determining factors in what helps people stay healthy. The main topic of this article is how religious institutions (Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus/ International Church of the Grace of God – here IIGD), by means of their doctrines (prosperity gospel) and business-like (including religious marketing) strategies of growth, influence the everyday life of their followers in Brazil, while taking advantage of the “health and wealth” concept for the sake of their own expansion.

Keywords: Neo-Pentecostalism, Brazil, health and wealth, prosperity gospel, Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus (IIGD)

Introduction

The concept of “health and wealth” has always been strongly linked to the religious culture of Brazil, mostly due to the traditional importance of the rule of reciprocity in relations with the sacrum (*do ut des*) and, therefore, the “anthropological utility” of religion in Brazil, expected to influence the life of its followers *hic et nunc* rather than in a distant eschatological perspective. The “health and wealth” phenomena nowadays encompass many different types of religious offers, mostly of Pentecostal origins – since the 80s, one of the most prominent “health and wealth” options has been the Neo-Pentecostal¹ prosperity gospel, with its popularity growing rapidly

* University of Warsaw, Institute of the Americas and Europe, American Studies Center, Orcid: 0000-0002-6594-0058, email: r.siuda@uw.edu.pl

especially in the shantytown urban metropolitan settings². However, the interest for a “working religion”, improving the quality of life and, at least subjectively, influencing daily performance – in a positive way – in many different fields of human activity, is visible also in Charismatic Renewal Catholic trends, in some liberation theology movements, Spiritist healing-oriented practices, and Afro-Brazilian cults³.

The objective of this paper is to show, based on qualitative research carried out in Florianópolis, in April of 2018, some examples and characteristics of contemporary “health and wealth” oriented Neo-Pentecostal phenomena, practices and strategies at the Igreja Internacional da Graça de Deus (here: IIGD) in Brazil. In order to see how the institution uses various strategies to attract prospective faithful with its “health and wealth” prosperity gospel and to retain them to ensure the sustainability of the IIGD expansion project and how the faithful themselves experience and evaluate the “health and wealth” efficiency of their church, available data about IIGD was collected, observation *in loco* was conducted for three weeks and twelve members of the church (eight women and four men), including two pastors and two “obreiras” (female volunteers involved in the church organization) were interviewed⁴. In an attempt to reach the objectives of this descriptive study, in the article I present: basic, general notions connected with the prosperity gospel, its controversies and specificity; some “health and wealth” oriented religious marketing strategies implemented by the IIGD, often in comparison to another important Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal church (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus/The Universal Church of the

¹ We use the term Neo-Pentecostal after Mariano, R. *Neopentecostais. Sociologia do novo pentecostalismo no Brasil*, Loyola, São Paulo 1999, although some other researchers apply also other names to the movement, like “autonomous Pentecostalism”, “Post-Pentecostalism” or “syncretic Pentecostalism”. Neo-Pentecostal churches are modalities of Pentecostalism based on the electronic models created first in the US, following the implantation of some North American “subsidiaries”. On the one hand, just like traditional Pentecostal churches, they stress the importance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the study of the Bible, miracles and healings; on the other hand, Neo-Pentecostals are much more liberal in terms of the everyday life guiding rules (for instance in terms of clothing), they interpret wealth as Divine grace, they strongly compete against Catholicism and religions of Afro-Brazilian roots, stress public rituals of exorcism as the most efficient healing procedure, invest ostensibly in the media and in politics. Neo-Pentecostal churches are usually defined as the third wave of Brazilian Pentecostalism and include such institutions as: Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (1977), Internacional da Graça de Deus (1980), Cristo Vive (1986), Renascer em Cristo (1986), Igreja Mundial de Poder de Deus (1986), Igreja Nacional do Senhor Jesus Cristo (1994). P. Freston, *Breve história do pentecostalismo brasileiro*, in: A. Antoniazzi, (et al.), *Nem anjos nem demônios: Interpretações sociológicas do pentecostalismo*, Vozes, Petrópolis 1994.

² This process of “geographical” expansion is well depicted in: C.R. Jacob, et al., *Atlas da filiação religiosa e indicadores sociais no Brasil*, PUC-Rio, Rio de Janeiro 2003.

³ See, for instance: R. Motta, R. Siuda-Ambroziak, *The sacrifice, the feast and the power of the priesthood in the Xangô cult of Recife*, “Studia Religiosa”, 2018, vol.51/4, p. 279-295, C. Rocha, *John of God. The Globalization of Brazilian Faith Healing*, Oxford, 2017.

⁴ I do not refer myself in the text directly to all of the interviews. Some stories have been chosen to illustrate specific issues, others – serve only as a background, sometimes providing some micro-statistical information about the interviewed group characteristics.

Kingdom of God, here IURD) that I focused on in my earlier research⁵; examples of Church affiliates⁶ experiences with various kinds of healing triggered by means of IIGD "health and wealth" prosperity gospel. I treat the IIGD here not only as a church – a religious institution, depository of a Christian idea of *sacrum*, but also as a *sui generis* religious enterprise or holding and as a "therapeutic center", in which the profane aspects of the believers' life find themselves in the center of attention and religious services are supposed to compensate for the earthly sufferings provoking conversions, on which the church's standing and expansion depend.

The "health and wealth" prosperity gospel and religious marketing

In Brazil, the prosperity gospel boasts, for decades already, of growing popularity – more and more Brazilian Christians believe that God wants them to be strong, healthy and prosperous and that religious faith is important for success, also in purely economic terms⁷. While the prosperity gospel is not monolithic, its teachings follow a general pattern, established initially in the United States (see some examples of classical books of North American prosperity gospel preachers: *Abundant life* by Pat Robertson, *Daily blessing* by Oral Roberts, *Name it and claim it* by Kenneth Copeland) blending Pentecostal revivalism with elements of positive thinking and convincing believers that faith, unleashing the full powers of the Holy Spirit, is a supernatural force that can be used to achieve personal success, including physical, mental and

⁵ See, for instance: R. Siuda-Ambroziak, *Religia w Brazylii. Uwarunkowania społeczno-kulturowe*, ZW Nomos, Kraków 2015; R. Siuda-Ambroziak, E. Stachowska *Religious Market and Its Entrepreneurs: Comparative Perspective on Brazil and Poland*, „Problemy Zarządzania”, 2017, vol. 15, no. 3 (70), p. 2, pp. 24-44.

⁶ Pastors are usually very difficult to reach for interviews, as they have to report such requests to their superiors, asking for permission. The interviews were not, as a rule, recorded due to some informants' objections, instead notes were taken during and after conversations, which left the interviewees much more at ease (there are no direct quotations in the text). They were also assured that their real names would remain undisclosed. Some researchers have already commented on a difficulty of reaching Neo-Pentecostal pastors, and people involved in the churches' organizational structure (obreiras) – some church founders prohibit their staff to give interviews to protect the "secrets of craft" or the "recipes for success". See: C.L. Mariz, *Pentecostalismo, Renovação Carismática Católica e Comunidades Eclesiais de Base: uma análise comparada*, CERIS, Rio de Janeiro 2001; L.S. Campos, *Teatro, templo e Mercado: organização e marketing de um empreendimento neopentecostal*, Vozes, Petrópolis 1997.

⁷ An important growth of the (Neo)Pentecostal branch of Christianity in Brazil is really impressive: according to the IBGE National Census, in 2000 there were 26,184,942 (Neo)Pentecostals with the average annual growth of 7.43%. This number increased in 2010 to 42,275,440, which makes up for 61% in 10 years. In 2000, (Neo)Pentecostals represented 15.4% of Brazilian population, reaching 22.2% in 2010, with an increase of c. 16 million people.

material wealth, enabling what people wish to become true⁸. It means that believers should use faith to conceive ideas in their mind and speak them into existence, because through the sacrifice of the cross they can all enjoy health and prosperity. Christians are supposed to show their faith by means of paying real tithe as a sign of their fidelity to God and by means of other voluntary donations, which are supposed to bring extra “returns on investment” based on the reciprocity rule commonly accepted in Brazilian culture. The reality of poverty, disease and sickness are repudiated, and it is maintained that God is glorified when His believers are rich, healthy and happy, enjoying life to the fullest extent possible – their life in poverty violates His will. Earning and possessing money is not viewed as something sinful, it is to be used to the benefit of the people and the church⁹. A lack of faith is labeled as the reason why people fail to be healed and enjoy abundant wealth: God never wants people to suffer or be poor and it is Satan and sin that are the culprits behind every form of sickness, tragedy, and hardship that exists. People should know their rights as the redeemed, victorious children of God and take full advantage of them in all aspects of human life. But they also have to take a risk, trust in God and do their part – first offer something in order to receive, first donate something themselves in order to be blessed.

As it can be inferred, the “health and wealth” theology is often viewed as controversial. On the one hand, it is about improving attitudes towards life, “keeping your chin up”, empowering people in dire situations, from which always happiness, abundance and gradual transformation of individuals, families and communities may result with a renewed sense of hope. Successful, powerful preachers, themselves not originating from the country’s social and economic elites, demonstrate, by means of their millionaires’ paradise life of religious superstars, that God’s blessing does work miracles and that they know how to show their adherents the right path to follow. On the other hand, they influence their followers not only to believe in the healing power of their faith, but also to bring tithes and other offerings, according to the reciprocity rule, which does not automatically guarantee the change of the real-life picture of poverty, violence, substandard living conditions, addictions and abuse. It may be deliberately misleading or manipulating believers, if having strong faith and investing in their relationship with God, they are promised abundant health and wealth in return. As affluence is presented to be the faithful Christians’ God-given right, no wonder the “health and wealth” concept appeals

⁸ Cf. K. Sarles, *A theological evaluation of the prosperity gospel*, “Bibliotheca Sacra”, 1986, no. 143, pp. 329-350; S. Hunt, *Magical moments: an intellectualist approach to the neo-Pentecostal faith ministries*, “Religion”, 1998, no. 28(3), pp. 271-280; S. Hunt, *Dramatizing the “health and wealth gospel”: belief and practice of a neo-Pentecostal “faith” ministry*, “Journal of Beliefs and Values”, 2000, no. 21(1), pp. 73-86; D.R. McConnell, *A different gospel*, Peabody, MA, Hendrickson 1995.

⁹ S. Hunt, *Dramatizing the “health and wealth gospel”...*, op. cit., p. 73; K. Sarles, *A theological evaluation of the prosperity gospel*, op. cit., p. 331.

mostly to those economically deprived, which shows clearly in the Brazilian Neo-Pentecostals statistics¹⁰. They are the ones in need of various kinds of healing, related to their physical and mental health and their financial standing. But they are also the ones who do not have too much to invest and often take serious risks in order to financially "bet it all" on God and experience the complete physical, spiritual and material healing, which, according to the Donabedian conceptual model¹¹, consists of three categories: "structure", "process", and "outcome", for the sake of this study understood, respectively as: context in which miraculous healing takes place, whereabouts of transaction between "health and wealth" seekers and provider, and the effects of healing. No matter if the healing actually takes place or is only projected as a future possibility or subjectively perceived to have happened, prospective faithful must first be successfully communicated about the existence of such an opportunity, they must be shown and convinced that the "health and wealth" prosperity doctrine can work miracles for them. And this is where business-oriented strategies come in very handy for any religious organization having such an offer, if used in a way that is acceptable in a given society.

Indeed, the promotion of new religious culture in Brazil based on the prosperity gospel "health and wealth" concepts happens greatly due to the implementation of various religious marketing strategies, which make people believe in the special value offered to them by a given religious enterprise in terms of possible rewards (the more immediate, the better) as they enter into an exchange system with the church, involving material – tangible and spiritual – intangible goods¹². If they are satisfied with the balance of exchange, they continue investing in their church, contributing to its success, and supporting its various initiatives, especially those of proselytizing (missionary) character. Religious marketing is an institutional strategy aimed not only at attracting future members, satisfying their needs and "barter trading" with them, but also at making them loyal to their church, providing it with regular means to sustain its activities in the long run. The most popular and effective way to disseminate nowadays the knowledge about a given "religious product", to provoke conversions and guarantee members' retention is a competent and efficient use of various means of communication (radio, TV, Internet, film, music, book, journal), thanks to which post-modern consumers in fluid times cannot only look for instant solutions to their problems and ways of satisfying their needs, but also access the product in their own pace, time, according to their own schedule. The doctrine may become, therefore, a "vending philosophy", a way of selling various products offered in the religious market, such as salvation, health or prosperity. However,

¹⁰ According to the 2010 Population Census in Brazil, (Neo)Pentecostals represent the most feminized, youngest, least educated and poorest groups of mostly urban dwellers: <https://censo2010.ibge.gov.br/noticias/censo?id=3&idnoticia=2170&view=noticia>.

¹¹ A. Donabedian, *The quality of care: How can it be assessed?*, "JAMA", 1988, no. 260(12), pp. 1743-8.

¹² P. Kotler, G. Armstrong, *Princípios de marketing*, Pearson Prentice Hall, São Paulo 2007, p. 4.

with a progressive market saturation by a given religious doctrine, there appears a constant need for its differentiation from offers of other competitors, as well as providing certain “extras” that would distinguish it from the rest. In such a way, religious organizations start offering additional bonuses and incentives for the affiliates (air-conditioned, spacious and well communicated buildings, day-care center, movie theaters, sport facilities for teenagers, etc.) and church leaders, counting on their own knowledge, experience and charisma, start investing in professional use of all possible means of communication to acquaint the world with their message. All in all, no matter how the prosperity gospel is viewed, it is clear that it fosters a shift from the transcendent future to the workaday present, the focus is taken off of “theocentric providence” and placed on “anthropocentric prosperity” and a much more pragmatic approach to life and religion in which the needs of the individual attain foremost importance is promoted – also by means of marketing strategies¹³.

The “health and wealth” provider

Considering the heterogeneity of experiences and internal diversity of the Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal movement, in this article, I concentrate on one of the biggest Brazilian churches of this kind – the IIGD, founded in 1980 in Rio de Janeiro by Romildo Ribeiro Soares (called in Brazil “Missionary Soares” or “the Missionary”). The beginning of the IIGD was preceded first by the founder’s membership in the Pentecostal Church “Nova Vida”, then his affiliation to the church “Casa da Bênção” (The House of Blessing), where in 1975 he was ordained a pastor. In the same year, however, he decided to start his own church *Cruzada para o Caminho Eterno*, but it was not successful. After two years, in cooperation with his brother-in-law, Edir Macedo, he launched, once again, a new church – Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD), which they both co-managed till 1980, when, after a series of disagreements and internal problems, Soares was forced to leave¹⁴. He decided, this time alone, to found his own church, opening it first in the Center of Rio de Janeiro and then transferring it to Baixada Fluminense¹⁵. In 2003, he started the expansion of the IIGD in the US with the first “daughter company” opening in a hotel in Florida¹⁶.

Nowadays, apart from Brazil and the USA, the IIGD is present, according to the information on its website, in many Latin American countries, in Asia (Japan

¹³ B.W. Speck, *Spirituality in higher education: a literature review*, in: B.W. Speck, S.L. Hoppe (eds), *Searching for spirituality in higher education*, Peter Lang, Bern 2007, pp. 3-34.

¹⁴ A. Corten, J.-P. Dozon, A.P. Oro, *Les nouveaux conquérants de la foi-L’Eglise universelle du royaume de Dieu (Brésil)*, Karthala Editions, 2003.

¹⁵ Information taken from the IIGD blog: <http://gracadedeusjua.blogspot.com/2014/08/a-historia-da-igreja-internacional-da.html>.

¹⁶ Information on the American expansion of the IIGD: <http://nossaradioua.com/iigd/>.

and India), in a few African countries and in Europe (Portugal, Spain, France and Great Britain), having, altogether, over 3000 branches in Brazil and abroad, and, in Brazil, according to the Datafolha Research Institute census from 2014, representing over 2% of all Pentecostals with over 1.195.380 members¹⁷. The seat of the church in Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, where my research was carried out, was opened quite recently, in April, 2014. This explains why the majority of its affiliates are converts from other creeds and churches, including those of Neo-Pentecostal character – the transitions of the faithful within (Neo)Pentecostalism are very common in Brazil and, paradoxically, its vulnerability to schisms, is probably one the pillars of success of (Neo)Pentecostal movement, allowing for the continuous growth of the variety of its offer in the market. However, the Missionary, himself a dissident, who always decided (before founding the IIGD) to set up his own churches due to misunderstandings with other pastors, anticipates and prevents such situations, not allowing for schisms: his church is well consolidated and structured, its expansion obeys internal, centralized models of planning and management with all the "strings" gathered in the hands of the founder, himself taking all decisions (both personal and financial). According to the IIGD pastors, all the income from "subsidiaries" goes directly to the headquarters and pastors are paid salaries depending on their efficiency in "fishing for new souls" and collecting contributions; they are also promoted basing on their results, usually spending years as "commissioned pastors", a kind of interns, before being given more of a leeway in their "pastorpreneurship" practice.

The biggest Brazilian Neo-Pentecostal churches (IURD of Bishop Macedo and IIGD of Missionary Soares) share many operational characteristics, business-like organization, marketing strategies, strong televangelism and proselytism (the trademark of the IIGD has been, since the church's founding, a TV program "Show da Fé"/ "The Show of Faith"), national and international expansionism and even, to some point, the schedule of the congregational meetings (Mondays: Abundant Life; Tuesday: Women; Wednesday: Family; Thursday: Health; Friday: Liberation from addictions and evil spirits; Saturday: Youth; Sunday: Teachings for the baptized). Both of them also concentrate on physical, mental and financial healing and prosperity as one of God's promises, which all make up for their own, idiosyncratic version of a "health and wealth" prosperity gospel, which is directed at solving the faithful's problems of various kinds and origins¹⁸. There are, however, slight differences between them: while Macedo stresses, belligerently, the concept of the "Holy War" waged by Christians against the forces of evil and enters into many religious conflicts, Soares concentrates on the much calmer "determination doctrine", based on the

¹⁷ Number of branches consulted by means of addresses on the IIGD website: http://ongrace.com/portal/?page_id=26247&pg=0; number of affiliates according to Datafolha: <https://datafolha.folha.uol.com.br/opiniaopublica/2016/12/1845231-44-dos-evangelicos-sao-ex-catolicos.shtml>.

¹⁸ M. Cunha, M do Nascimento, *A explosão gospel: um olhar das ciências humanas sobre o cenário evangélico no Brasil*, Mauad Editora Ltda, Rio de Janeiro 2007.

notion of people being entitled to divine blessing, grace, healing and prosperity as protection against evil through Jesus' sacrifice¹⁹. Soares does not affirm that wealth is a visible proof of fidelity to God – according to him, it might be a gift of God, but it does not mean that every rich person is faithful and that every faithful person will automatically become rich. Prosperity is explained not so much as a synonym to material wealth and financial conquests, but rather to internal cleanness, fidelity, dignity and pride. Prosperity is more of a liberation from misery and sin than a simple recipe for becoming “filthy rich”²⁰.

The two churches, due to their appealing to the same target market, compete fiercely against each other – currently, after the inauguration of Macedo's Temple of Salomon in São Paulo in 2014, the biggest cathedral of Soares' IIGD, with the capacity of over 10 000 people, is also being constructed in the same city: the Temple of the Nations²¹. The IIGD, just like IURD, is famous for its massive presence in various means of communication, especially TV and radio broadcasting networks. Soares occupies one of the leading positions among people appearing on all TV screens in Brazil on live transmission, in primetime – according to the consulted weekly schedules, his brand program (*O Show da Fé*), can be seen at 20:28 on the *Band TV*, at 21:30 at the *RedeTV!* and at the *RIT – Rede Internacional de Televisão* (belonging to him since 1999) on Saturdays and Sundays at 19:20²². Apart from the *RIT*, since 2007, he has been owner of the *Nossa TV*²³, and since 2002 IIGD has used its own radio broadcasting station *Nossa Rádio*, with 18 retransmission stations in Brazil and, since 2011, transmitting also for the US market²⁴. In 2010, Soares founded a movie distribution company *Graça Filmes* and subsequently started producing blockbuster religious films (*Três Histórias, Um Destino / Three stories, One Destiny*, 2012; *Deus Não Está Morto / God is not Dead*, 2014; *Questão de Escolha / Redeemed*, 2014, starring Soares himself²⁵). IIGD owns a recording studio, founded in 1993 (*Graça Music*) and a publishing house, founded in 1983 (*Graça Editorial*), responsible for the main journals of the church with circulation of over million issues (*Jornal Show da Fé* and *Revista Graça*)²⁶.

¹⁹ The official site of the IIGD on the determination doctrine: http://ongrace.com/portal/?missionario_responde=determinao-15402; http://ongrace.com/portal/?missionario_responde=vontade-de-deus-x-determinao-15671.

²⁰ R.R. Soares, *Como Tomar Posse da Bênção*, Graça Editorial, São Paulo 2004. http://ongrace.com/portal/?missionario_responde=prosperidade-de-deus-16244; http://ongrace.com/portal/?page_id=6&&tipo=&p=Predestina%C3%A7%C3%A3o.

²¹ To see the Temple in construction: <http://www.templodagraa.com.br/>.

²² The website of the *RIT TV*: <http://www.rittv.com.br/>; The website of the *Nossa TV*: <https://www.nossatv.tv.br/>.

²³ M. Cunha, M do Nascimento, *A explosão gospel...*, op. cit., p. 61.

²⁴ The website of the *Nossa Radio*: <http://www.nossaradio.com.br/>.

²⁵ Movie studio website: <http://www.gracafilmes.com.br/>; the best world Christian movie's award for *God is not Dead*: https://www.christiancinema.com/catalog/newsdesk_info.php?newsdesk_id=3115#.

²⁶ *Graça Music* recording studio website: <https://www.gracamusica.com.br/>; *Graça Editorial* (books and journals): <http://www.gracaeditorial.com.br/site/>.

The IIGD invests also in the educational sector, since 1998, running its own *Theological Academy* (AGRADE)²⁷ for pastors, and investing in such a way in preparation of their own staff, and for a few years – the College of the People (*Faculdade do Povo* – FAPSP), which offered courses in Social Communication, mostly for the sake of the internal broadcasting network.

It is not difficult to see that the IIGC has been operating like a *sui generis* religious holding, similar to IURD and some other religious enterprises in other countries²⁸, which apply principles and concepts of the so-called "religious marketing"²⁹. Already during the first contact with potential "clients", sometimes even before them entering the church building, there is someone to greet them in front of the entrance, to "break the ice", to try to discover their specific needs and problems, to give basic information about the IIGD, and suggest which meeting in the schedule could be advantageous to attend for this particular person. This contact is usually warm and personal, made by one of obreiras, female volunteers, who are the genuine "business card" of the institution, getting to know the newcomers and adapting, during the first conversation, the offer of the church to the specific, individual needs³⁰. The product offered by IIGD is flexibly tailored to satisfy various sectors of the market – as I have mentioned, every day there is a different strategic meeting directed at a different kind of target-clients, suggesting solutions to completely different problems, according to age, marital status, financial standing, state of health, etc. with all of them completing a jigsaw puzzle of a large and extremely heterogeneous Brazilian faith market segmentation, including many variables, paths, desires, needs, resources, attitudes and ways of belonging and participating.³¹ Dividing the whole market into smaller segments is definitely more efficient in providing products and services aimed at a particular group of prospective and present affiliates and make it, at the same time, more cohesive and stable³².

The decision on opening a church in a given place is always carefully weighed and preceded by research on local demography and economy, in order to confirm the existence of the human target market and possibilities of growth. The first investments are usually made in the form of renting buildings, mostly bankrupt movie theaters or supermarkets, which are cheap and easy to adjust for the purposes of the congregational meetings. Various features of the place are taken into account: movement of people around it, accessibility, abundant transportation, and its seating

²⁷ AGRAD: <http://www.agrade.com.br/agrade/>; FAPSP: official facebook site has been inactive since 2015: <https://pt-br.facebook.com/fapsp.official>.

²⁸ R. Siuda-Ambroziak, *Religia w Brazylji...*, op. cit.; R. Siuda-Ambroziak, E. Stachowska, *Religious Market and Its Entrepreneurs...*, op. cit.

²⁹ J. McCarthy, D.W. Perreault, *Princípios de marketing*, Ltc, Rio de Janeiro 2002; L.E. Boone, D.L. Kurtz, *Marketing contemporâneo*, Ltc, Rio de Janeiro, 1998.

³⁰ P. Kotler, G. Armstrong, *Princípios de marketing*, op. cit.

³¹ J. McCarthy, D.W. Perreault, *Op.cit.*, 2002.

³² P. Kotler, G. Armstrong, *Princípios de marketing*, op. cit.

capacity. With the increase of the number of faithful, the seat of the church is usually changed accordingly, into a bigger and more spacious one, but sometimes a decision is taken to purchase a plot and build its own temple, if the prospects of further growth are not in doubt³³.

The church building is located in Florianópolis in the center of the city, a strategic place from the point of view of the number of people working there, living in the direct neighborhood, and using public transport facilities. It is also the best possible location in terms of the profile of the IIGD majority target market population³⁴. The center of Florianópolis is surrounded by densely populated shantytowns (called “comunidades”/communities), where the majority of the IIGD followers live, many of them migrants from other regions of Brazil, believing that Florianópolis offers them better opportunities – indeed, it is one of the richest state capitals of Brazil, but, in the last decades, new “communities” have mushroomed in and around the city, and more and more people continue to arrive with great hopes and expectations. In most new settlements, sewage, sanitation facilities, and sources of fresh water are scarce, and many not so successful migrants suffer from depression or other psychological afflictions that make them despondent and frustrated. The city is not prepared for the influx of so many newcomers – for instance, it suffers from serious transportation problems and does not have any central urban sewage cleaning system. In such a context, the seat of the IIGD church offers something exceptional, completely out of the majority of the faithful life conditions, making it pleasurable and satisfying to spend time in: it is in a modern, refurbished, spacious, elegant, well-preserved, air-conditioned building, with comfortable chairs, music, high-tech equipment and – all in all, very good entertainment. For mothers, child-care is available during the meetings. The toilets are clean and well maintained.

During each meeting there is always time for individual financial contributions, usually of at least three different types: an offer of the day; tithe; contributions towards ministry and/or sale of various religious products (often used by the faithful as symbolic protection, talismans) with the IIGD logo. In the case of the first offer, the pastor asks the congregation to contribute towards a specific objective, with any possible donation, according to their financial possibilities. The tithe is obligatory and amounts to 10% of all the gross monthly income and the faithful bring it along in special envelopes marked with the church logo. The ministry donation may be directed to a particular initiative, such as, for instance, the electoral fund of a member

³³ Some scholars have commented on what they call (Neo)Pentecostal “informal and ephemeral territoriality”: the seats of the church subsidiaries are often changed, closed or leased, depending on the branch success in a given place. No investments are made with no clear perspective of growth and return: M.S. Machado, *A lógica da reprodução Pentecostal e sua expressão especial*, in: M. Santo, et al. (org.), *O novo mapa do mundo. Fim do século e globalização*, Hucitec-Anpur, São Paulo 1993.

³⁴ L.E. Boone, D.L. Kurtz, *Marketing contemporâneo*, op. cit.

of the church, printing a book, or concrete missionary work to be done. The products offered for sale, with the church logo, can be of various kinds, usually linked to the current missionary theme of the week or the month. They are usually meant to better illustrate the theme (for instance, a white feather when angels guardians are discussed, a CD with gospel music on the particular issue, a DVD with the latest IIGD movie). They may also be a specific service, or an access to a particular place or event³⁵. It is precisely at the moments of contribution that many marketing concepts and strategies are employed: the products on sale are always the same for all the IIGD churches, which makes it easy and cheap to plan in advance, buy and distribute. The ideas of the products are internally conceived by the top management of the church and the target market for the products sale is also internal, serving as a kind of incentive for deeper institutional involvement of the buyers. All the church representatives participate in the sale as a team: preparing, presenting the idea behind the product, linking its meaning to the theme of the meeting or a campaign, advertising, showing directly to the people, explaining the specifications in a way that makes sense to them. The CDs are played on such occasions, the movies' trails are shown on the screens, etc. Many of these products are made by IIGD holding enterprises, like *Graça Editora* Publishing House and *Graça Music* Recording Studio. In order to facilitate the purchase, there are various means of payment available to the buyers: obreiras enter the crowd with credit card machines and offer to divide the payment in installments with no interest rates if someone is short of cash.

The IIGD uses branding for all the products sold at the church – they all appear with the IIGD logo – a globe, referring to the international expansionism of the Church with a cross standing in the place of Brazil. The IIGD has also its own packaging and consumer services of assistance in case of a product failure. Apart from the particular day of the sale during the meeting, all the IIGD products can be later bought at the local shop belonging to the church and they are advertised by means of the IIGD own websites, radio and TV stations with very low costs of internally prepared commercials and a high level of product exposure and saturation. An integrated marketing communication strategy³⁶ seems to be applied in a careful and top-down coordination of all communication channels of the IIGD towards transmitting a clear, consistent and attractive message about the church and all its products: personal data of the faithful (name, address, email, mobile number) are used to send out information on sales and promotions of its products, using personalized and highly selective strategies oriented towards specific target of the faithful and digital b2c (business to consumer) marketing is implemented by means of using various sites of the church, its "daughter companies" and social media (facebook, twitter and a few blogs). The main website of the IIGD (ongrace.com) is itself

³⁵ P. Kotler, G. Armstrong, *Princípios de marketing*, op. cit.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 235.

a powerful search engine for finding any information about the church, its leader, products, meetings, locations, public events and missionary campaigns, donations, courses, photos, TV and radio stations, together with active hyperlinks to online live programs of the founder.

The “health and wealth” seekers

People that I met at the IIGD in Florianópolis could be divided roughly into three groups. The first one consists of those who are still in search of their church, religion or religious community, often appearing in various temples of different denominations, taking advantage of many offers at the same time, but without legitimizing their membership anywhere. The second group refers to those who come to the meetings out of mere curiosity, sometimes due to the central location of the church they drop in accidentally, or because they come to attend a particular kind of a meeting that they find attractive, but they are not interested (or not interested yet) in permanent participation – they might be called “window-shoppers”, or “religious tourists” and they have no institutional links with the IIGD. The last group consists of the legitimate members of the church, who have been converted, baptized and who participate, with their tithes, in its growth³⁷. The most interesting interviewees for the sake of this study belong precisely to the third group and, in this section, some stories of their conversion and participation (membership) will be shared in an endeavor to look for “health and wealth” experience in their institutional belonging.

When asked about their religious trajectory, the majority (ten out of twelve) of the interviewed IIGD members (including pastors) reply that they were baptized in the Catholic Church as children, but were “inactive Catholics” for many years before their (Neo)Pentecostal conversion. Seven out of twelve already tried other (Neo)-Pentecostal churches before coming to the IIGD, which shows clear “transition” trends within this branch of Christianity, usually from more rigid options (for instance: Assembly of God), with strict behavioral requirements linked with dress code and entertainment, towards more liberal ones, concentrating on “health and wealth” instant problem solving. Those who passed through other Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal denominations before affiliating with IIGD, often stress, as an important reason for their religious choices, the way a given local church community and their pastor work, how effective the church is in helping them out in the times of trouble,

³⁷ There are different ways of describing specificity of belonging to churches in Brazil, viewed by some researchers as: “a transit of belonging”, when a person changes a church/a religion and adopts all its dogmas and doctrines; “a belonging transit”, where, apart from belonging to a given church, a person attends others; and “a non-belonging transit”, which means that a person appears at different cults of different churches with no formal belonging to any of them. S.D. Souza, *Trânsito religioso e construções simbólicas temporárias: uma bricolagem contínua*, “Estudos de Religião”, 2001, no. 20, pp. 157-167.

which are factors related to "health and wealth" issues. All the informants confirmed that their interest for this particular church came out of getting acquainted with it on TV, while watching the Missionary's programs, which seems to be the most effective way to attract newcomers (during the program, precise info on various locations of the IIGD branches is provided for the viewers). In order to make them stay in the church, they were shown, directly or indirectly, during religious meetings and by means of their personal involvement in the church, new positive perspectives for changes that could happen in their own life, due to the "reciprocity contract" with God by means of the IIGD pastors' intercession. The conviction of finally "being in the right place" dawned onto the individual faithful in many different ways and at different stages of their life.

Four out of eight women who were interviewed for the sake of the study are middle-aged, two are elderly (over 70) and two are young, in their 20s. Dona Alzira is 78 years old, a widow, with only four grades of elementary education. She still works – she has her own mobile street vending stand with food in the city center, but she doesn't cook every day, mostly during warmer months. She has been the IIGD member since the beginning in 2014. Although she never "ascended" in the church structure, she has been asked a few times by pastors if she wouldn't like to get involved more in the church's chores. She attends meetings almost every day, as she lives nearby, but she still has important family obligations helping to look after her grandchildren when her daughter – a single mother - is at work. She was baptized as a child in the Catholic church, but she also experimented, when younger, with Umbanda, which she gave up later after getting married. She already passed through other Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal denominations: she says she converted over 25 years ago, at the Assembly of God. She felt attracted to IIGD by interesting meetings that she saw on TV and a substantial change in the quality of life that followed after she attended some of them – she was cured, right at the beginning, of regular headaches and, later, after the death of her husband, also of alcohol-dependency. She supports her church regularly, paying duly 10% of whatever she earns. She is sure everything goes to a good cause and God "keeps an eye on her" when she does what the pastor says is right. She is a good missionary – she has already brought six of her friends from the neighborhood to her church. Each of them has something to be grateful for to the pastor: one was cured out of depression and sedatives' dependency; another one had her pains in the spine stopped during the healing session; still one more managed to bring her husband back home from a drinking spree; another one started her own business and successfully paid off her debts... all of them come regularly, pay their tithes and two of them got further involved as obreiras.

Another interviewee, Beatriz, is a young mother of four-year-old twins, whom she usually leaves with her sister when she comes to assist the meetings. She is 22 years old and she has just gone back to school after a tumultuous break-up with

her much older partner, who was finally forced to pay alimony for their children. She wants to finish high school and has plans to go on studying administration and one day become “rich and totally self-sufficient”. She comes from a Catholic background, but after the death of her mother both she and her siblings stopped practicing and finally dropped out of the Church altogether. She says nobody cared actually about it – her father, in the middle-age crisis, was busy flirting with all the women around and, in breaks, getting drunk, and in their local parish nobody really noticed their disappearance as “the priest was much more excited about gambling”. For a few years she did not attend any church. That was, as she believes, one of the reasons for her “getting mixed up” with Ricardo, twice as old as she, and twice divorced, with whom she became pregnant after a few months of a relationship, at the age of 18. When she learned about the twin pregnancy, she was desperate and wanted an abortion. Especially that she was told that twin pregnancy is risky and she may face serious health problems of her newborns due to her alcohol and nicotine consumption at the very early stage. She got money from Ricardo and was on her way for her appointment, when she found herself passing by the recently opened IIGG. She had already heard about the church from TV programs. She felt “internally compelled to enter” and when she did, she saw two miraculous healings happening during the meeting. She says she could actually hear her deceased mother talking to her that everything was going to be all right and she didn’t need to worry. She decided to go back home. She says that the first encounter with IIGD on that day changed her life completely. It saved her two beautiful boys, who have become the power engine of change in her life, transforming her, from a silly teenager, into a self-conscious woman, ready to fight for her kids and for her better life. She stayed in the IIGD since then. As an average member, not getting too involved due to family duties. She appears there a maximum of twice a week, only when she manages to have someone look after the boys, as they are too disruptive. But she duly pays her tithe, hoping to one day marry a pastor.

Lisa, 38, is a married mother of three, of which one son recently died of leukemia. She finished her secondary education and has a stable job in one of the drugstores in the city center. She also comes from a Catholic family, but since she was a teenager, she has tried many other religious options, among them traditional Pentecostalism (Assembly of God) and later - Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. She seems to be very much involved in the IIGD organizational structure as an obreira, being one of the first affiliates. She feels respected and needed, talking about herself “as a successful person, with a stable professional career and a stable family situation”. She feels blessed and she is convinced that her deceased son is now “in a better place”. She tells me of her hopes to save him by miracle and how she assisted various meetings oriented towards miraculous healings that ended up healing her of a breast tumor, but did not heal him. She first appeared in the church looking for a miraculous healing for her relationship with her husband, which was extremely difficult due

to his drinking, gambling and marital infidelity. She herself notices that the "fast miracle" she was hoping for in this respect did not happen – it took her time to change her own behavior and to bring her husband to the IIGD. His conversion really changed their family life³⁸. She is also an assiduous TV "Show of Faith" watcher and she loves talking about the charisma of the church leader, Soares, whom she treats with great reverence as "a prophet" and a "living saint". She convinces me to watch the "Shows" systematically for a month. She is a well-organized person, always happy to help in the church. She often brings her teenage daughter along as well, and hopes one day she will find a husband there. I always see her buy things from the church, either during the meetings or at the store – she says they help her remember the issues that she heard about during the meeting. One day she buys a present also for me: it is a CD with Gospel Music referring to Easter time.

Another woman is Rosângela, 25 years old, coming originally from a Presbyterian family (a real rarity), who introduces herself as a "fiancée of a pastor from a different city". She converted two years ago, after having been cured, through watching a TV program of the Missionary, out of a compulsive eating disorder – since that time she has lost over 30 kilos. But she also needed help due to her difficult relationship with her ex-boyfriend, whom she met right after coming to Florianópolis from Rio Grande do Sul. She found a lot of support at the IIGD with other women asking about how she was after she started getting involved in the church. She felt needed and liked. Accepted and respected. Rosângela is one of very few people with complete secondary education and she wants to continue studying. For the time being, she works as a librarian aide. She recently managed to bring all her family to Florianópolis and have them convert, and I often see her with her mother and two younger sisters. She is also an obreira now and she comes to church almost every evening.

Regina came to IIGD after having already passed through various Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal denominations. She is 37 and, according to her judgment, has "perfect health". She is also quite successful in professional terms, as she has got her own small boutique which allows her to "live with dignity" and even employ two women from the neighborhood. But when she joined the IIGD, she was desperate: her business was almost lost due to debts she incurred to lease a space for her shop and she did not manage to attract enough clients. She came looking for financial healing and she says she has found it: on several occasions, the pastor went to give a special blessing to her business and women she made friends with in church helped her by "word of mouth". She finally managed to get onto a safe track and has been successful ever since. She was baptized Catholic, but when she met

³⁸ It has already been acknowledged that the effect of conversion on the tumultuous relationships can be very positive, especially when both partners start attending the same church and share the same creed. Another positive aspect of conversion is searching for a change in oneself instead of trying to change the partner. See: M.D. Machado, *Carismáticos e pentecostais. Adesão religiosa na esfera familiar*, ANPOCS, São Paulo 1996, p. 194-196.

her husband, he had already been divorced and her family did not accept her choice. She decided to go to a Pentecostal church and officially get married there, which she did. They have been a married couple since then, having already brought up two children, now themselves adults and self-sufficient. She says she chose IIGD due to a perfect location of the church and because she likes the meetings and her husband has a good relationship with pastors. They are both involved in the church and are now considered "VIP members" due to their stable financial and family standing.

Edilson is one of the two male members who come to church at least twice a week and who agreed to talk about his faith and affiliation. He is 55 and started attending three years ago, after the death of his wife. He completed only three classes of the elementary school and is practically illiterate, living now with his elder daughter who is divorced and has four young children. She came to live in Florianópolis from São Paulo to find better future for her kids, away from her abusive ex-husband, and Edilson helps her with extra money that he earns selling various Chinese products in the street. He says that his daughter started attending as well, after her child was cured by means of pastor's prayer of meningitis. Although she does not come very often, sometimes not even once a week, she always passes her envelope with tithe. What Edilson likes best about the church are the prosperity meetings and the current pastors. He hopes to be given a chance to provide better for his grandchildren in the future. He also started attending the church after watching a TV program of Soares, where the Missionary performed various miracles in the name of Christ and he says that the program is the most effective way of attracting people to the church, but he also finds the short distance from home and work facilitating his personal involvement and regular presence – he says directly that he would not be ready to travel long distances to any church due to money problems, which shows how good location of the IIGD influences participation of people who do not own cars and have limited access to resources.

The proximity and accessibility of the meeting places is definitely one of very important factors which makes the IIGD offer worth considering³⁹, however, it is by no means all. Other, no less important, factors seem to be: adequate, clear and well transmitted messaging, closely related to social, educational, cultural and economic backgrounds of the church members and potential newcomers; interesting and appealing meetings, joining elements of cult and entertainment; the possibility of acquiring social prestige by means of participation in the institutional activities (as a volunteer or, professionally, as a pastor); and, last but not least, an opportunity to change life, especially by means of the very much advertised miracles of faith, encompassing various kinds of healing: physical (illnesses, pains, tumors, etc.), emotional (difficulties in relationship, family problems, depression, loneliness), material (unemployment, debts, poverty). Indeed, the majority of IIGD members

³⁹ C. Mariz, *Coping with poverty*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1994.

I interviewed are poor and have a poor educational background, although some of them do consider themselves "successful", perhaps in comparison to other people from their congregation – having a stable job, which provides a regular income is already perceived as a "blessing". Most members approached the church believing in a possibility of miraculous healing. Although, objectively, their lives often have not improved in a dramatic (or even noticeable) way, they stress the fact that they have been "helped out". Sometimes family problems are solved due to the conversion of all the family members, which provokes a better understanding and a closer relationship, especially between the spouses. The involvement in the church raises the self-esteem of the female members, makes them feel important, respected and needed. Their status (objective or self-perceived) in the community becomes higher as they manage to solve their problems, and form internal networks of cooperation in the church. With it, sometimes also the financial situation of families is prone to positive change, though it is difficult to call it a "miracle of financial healing". Many people come to IIGD looking for a safe haven, a safe harbor, and they do receive attention, they are listened to and embraced, they start identifying with their church growth and prosperity⁴⁰. What is interesting is that these are mainly the faithful themselves (obreiras) who are responsible for the atmosphere reigning in a given church, the degree of acceptance and interest provided to the newcomers – pastors are not meant to stay in the same church for a long time, they are often replaced, sent in from other cities or regions.

All in all, we can say that what brings people to "health and wealth" oriented churches is mainly their pain and suffering: they all come with some kind of affliction and problem, let it be of material, physical or mental character and the response that is offered in the case of the Neo-Pentecostal prosperity gospel is always of a "rebellious" character, telling them not to comply passively with their situation, but fight for its improvement by means offered to them by their church: reciprocity contract with God based on the formal affiliation and the IIGD intercession, various sessions and rituals of healings, availability of the church services and staff, counselling⁴¹. What serves the purpose of the healing is often not so much a miracle (although many say they have actually experienced it), but rather positive emotions and human touch, which are main "detonators" of their religious adhesion, *sui generis* "small miracles" letting them experience the real, palpable presence and love of God through others.

⁴⁰ Some researchers confirm that only such factors as feeling accepted in a religious community may bring positive, verifiable effects on people's health, see: D. Hall, *Religious attendance More Cost-effective than Lipitor?*, "Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine", 2006, no. 19, p. 130-139.

⁴¹ P. Fry, G. Howe, *Duas respostas à aflição: umbanda e pentecostalismo*, "Debate e crítica", 1975, no. 6, pp. 75-94) consider Pentecostalism as "a religion which is an answer to pain", which is actually always a pre-condition to affiliation.

Conclusions

“Health and wealth” phenomena in contemporary Brazilian culture are strongly anthropocentric and “ego-focused” – self is at the heart of the prosperity gospel, treating religion as a magical force that can unleash the power of the Holy Spirit and bring health and wealth to those strong in faith and willing to claim God’s promises for their life. This “me” – centered outlook heavily relies on various religious marketing strategies and techniques used to draw prospective believers to church and provide its sustainability and growth.

“Health and wealth” Prosperity gospel is, as shown, sometimes controversial. However, in spite of a lot of criticism that it receives, there are also some potentially constructive aspects of it, though overshadowed by a crass emphasis on the pastors’ and founders’ financial success due to received donations: church leaders are often criticized for advancing their own aims and aspirations, preying on the destitute to build their ecclesiastical empires and applying marketing strategies in order to manipulate the people. On the other hand, looking at the “health and wealth” strategies and their practical dimension in their followers’ lives, it is necessary to say that, at least from their subjective point of view, the IIGD membership often pays off.

The presented stories told by some of the interviewees show that contemporary Brazilians often change their religious option, though mostly within the branch of Christianity, and at the expense of Catholicism. These changes are sometimes temporary, provisional, open to further transit possibilities, which keeps the (Neo)-Pentecostal churches management “on their toes” for not only attracting, but also retaining their faithful, preventing them from leaving and joining the “competition” in the religious market. This explains, to a great extent, the efficient use of religious marketing and all sorts of modern mass media for spreading their message and – big financial investments in such sectors, boosting their popularity, which was shown from the individual member’s perspective and their own experience with the “health and wealth” phenomena, related to their physical, mental and financial standing.