

SEZIONE MISCELLANEA

Promises in the Present Tense. Ritual Work on the Bible in Pentecostal Spiritual Warfare

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«Make these confessions to establish your identity in Christ Jesus:

I am not what the world thinks or says I am.

I am not what the devil or the kingdom of darkness says [...].

I am not the picture of what my idolatrous forefathers wished I should be. [...]

I am not what my father and mother think or want me to be. [...]

I am not what I think I am.

I am what the Word of God says I am».

Daniel Olukoya, *Prayer Rain*, 1999: 1.

Abstract

This article is based on field work carried out in a branch of the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) Pentecostal church in Rome. The MFM church was founded in Lagos in 1989 and propagates a message of salvation centred around the practice of spiritual warfare. In particular, the article is an analysis of an Hour of Solution, a religious service aimed at achieving radical change in churchgoers' lives by using prayer to fight a war against the powers of Satan. The analysis demonstrates that the service involves a ritual working on the Bible that transforms its verses into prayers, or rather, into lethal weapons in the spiritual struggle to obtain the prosperity that the Scripture promises as destiny. The article therefore looks specifically at the ritual sequences that alternate declamation of the Bible with prayer, illustrating the ways in which this ritual process seeks to contextualise the Word of God within the lives of the faithful to render the promise contained within extant and effective. It is demonstrated, therefore, that this contextualisation of the Word of God creates a tension between promise and present time that, while deeply evoking Pauline messianism, is also divergent as it traces its own unique relation between salvation and worldly destiny. Finally, it is shown that this Bible practice is also a working on the self that transforms the believer into

the subject of spiritual warfare who, in the fight against Satan's powers to realise the Word of God, verifies its promise and experiences its truth.

Key words: Pentecostal use of the Bible; Pentecostal prayer rituals; messianic time; transformation of the self; Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries.

Promesse al presente.

Rituale e Bibbia nella guerra spirituale pentecostale

Riassunto

Questo articolo si basa su una ricerca di terreno svolta a Roma presso la Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM), chiesa pentecostale fondata a Lagos nel 1989, che propone un messaggio di salvezza centrato sulla pratica della guerra spirituale. In particolare, l'articolo espone un'analisi dell'Hour of Solution, funzione religiosa volta a ottenere un cambiamento radicale nella vita dei fedeli, attraverso una lotta ingaggiata con la preghiera contro i poteri di Satana. Tale analisi mostra come vi sia un lavoro rituale sulla Bibbia che trasforma i suoi versi in preghiere, vale a dire, in armi letali con cui combattere la guerra spirituale per vincere quel destino di prosperità che è stato promesso nelle Scritture. In tal senso l'articolo si sofferma su quelle sequenze rituali in cui declamazione della Bibbia e preghiera si avvicendano. Lo scopo infatti è quello di illustrare come il processo rituale sia teso a contestualizzare la Parola di Dio nelle esistenze dei fedeli per rendere attuale ed effettiva la promessa in essa contenuta. Si vedrà, dunque, come questa contestualizzazione della Parola inneschi una tensione fra promessa e tempo presente che, pur richiamando fortemente il messianesimo paolino, se ne differenzia tracciando una relazione del tutto peculiare fra salvezza e destino mondano. In fine, si mostrerà come questa pratica della Bibbia sia anche un lavoro sul sé che trasforma il fedele nel soggetto della guerra spirituale. Un soggetto che, nella lotta contro i poteri di Satana per attualizzare la Parola di Dio, fa esperienza della verità della sua promessa.

Parole chiave: Uso pentecostale della bibbia; Rituali pentecostali di preghiera; Tempo messianico; trasformazioni del sé; Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries.

The Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries (MFM) is a Pentecostal church that was founded in 1989 in Lagos by Daniel Olukoya, who is still its General Overseer. The church's original nucleus was formed of a group of 24 believers who met regularly for prayer in the founder's house. MFM's growth, however, was precipitous: in 1994 the church moved to its

current premises and four years later it founded The Battle Cry Christian Ministries publishing house, allowing Olukoya's devotional books to reach a global audience. Olukoya's vast oeuvre includes over a hundred titles¹. It was also around this time that the Prayer City in Magboro (Ogun State) was built, a sacred space with a capacity of up to a 100.000 worshippers, today the international ritual headquarters and the main MFM pilgrimage centre (Adogame 2012: 81-82).

The early 2000s saw such a significant increase in membership that Olukoya was able to claim that «The Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries' Headquarters is the largest single Christian congregation in Africa, with attendance of over 200.000 in single meetings» (Olukoya 2007: 5). Though we ought to be wary of taking such assertions at face value², it is nevertheless true that MFM branches are present not only in many other African countries (including Angola, Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast, Gambia, Ghana, Namibia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo, South Africa, Malawi, Liberia) but also in Europe (mainly in the UK and Ireland), in the United States, in Latin America and in Asia (China, India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka)³. However, MFM's success is not an isolated case but rather follows a similar trajectory to other churches⁴ that came into being during the “new wave of Pentecostalism” (Hackett 1987; Ojo 1988a, 2007; Fatokun 2007; Marshall 2009: 78-91), the movement that began in the 1970s to redefine forms of religiosity in Southern Nigeria but that went on to spread across the globe as it took advantage of transnational migratory networks. In contrast to the Pentecostal denominations that had been present in Nigeria since the 1920s⁵,

¹ The full catalogue of Olukoya's books is available on the website of the Battle Cry Christian Ministries: <<https://battlecrystores.com/shop/>> [5/12/2018].

² A claim that Ruth Marshall (2016: 110) refutes, citing the Redeemed Christian Church of God as Nigeria's (and Africa's) largest Pentecostal church.

³ MFM's website includes a list of branches worldwide: <<http://mountainoffire.ipower.com/globalsite/directory.>> [5/12/2018].

⁴ Similar examples include the trajectory taken by the Redeemed Christian Church of God under the leadership of Enoch Adeboye (1980), as well as the Living Faith Church Worldwide (commonly known as the Winner's Chapel), founded by David Oyedepo in 1983.

⁵ For a reconstruction of *Aladura* Pentecostalism see Peel's seminal work (1968); for a reconstruction of the history of Nigerian Pentecostalism more broadly see: Ojo (1988a, 1988b, 2007) and Fatokun (2007).

these new churches took up the demonization of “traditional spirits” and transformed it into a global spiritual war between God and Satan. Furthermore, if the Pentecostal revival movements had been in the past “holiness movements” – movements advocating a withdrawal from the world – the new wave made prosperity its gospel⁶, propagating a message that promises miraculous worldly success, thus allowing for the emergence of a new religious leadership whose charism is no longer based purely on the gifts of the Holy Spirit (healing, prophecy, deliverance) but also on their own personal material success, taken as a sign of divine benediction (Gifford 1998: 33).

As such, newer pastors often come from different socio-cultural backgrounds to the previous generation: Daniel Olukoya (2005: 27), though recognising, for example, Joseph A. Babalola as an apostle of faith – a steam-roller driver who founded the Christ Apostolic Church in 1941 – is also able to boast in his bio of being not only «anointed by God, [...] a teacher, prophet, evangelist and preacher of the word» but of also having to his name «a PhD in Molecular Genetics from the University of Reading, United Kingdom» with «over eighty scientific publications to his credit» (Olukoya 2007: 5).

While MFM shares much in common with other successful Nigerian churches from the broad and diverse spectrum of the global Pentecostal movement, Olukoya’s church is noted for the particular emphasis it places on spiritual warfare. The church’s approach to the topic of spiritual warfare, however, is not so much to articulate doctrinal insight on the topic but rather to propose ritual practices centred around prayer (Hackett 2011; Adogame 2012; Ugwuweye & Uzuegbunam 2013; Marshall 2016)⁷ with which worshippers fight to liberate themselves from the power Satan has over them. What is at stake in this conflict that takes place in the invisible world is the worldly destiny of prosperity that God has reserved for the faithful and which Satan prevents them from achieving by pitting them against destructive spiritual forces.

⁶ Prosperity motives emerged in the US healing revival of the late 1940s and became prominent in the 1950s. For a reconstruction of the spread and different forms of prosperity Gospel in Africa and in African diasporas see Heuser (2015).

⁷ For further reading on the MFM church and Daniel Olukoya see: Gifford (2014, 2015: 13-28; 2016). For a comprehensive reconstruction of the charismatic/Pentecostal universe in the Nigerian context see: Hackett (1987); Marshall-Fratani (1993); Ojo (1988a, 1988b, 2006); Marshall (2009); Wariboko (2014).

In other words, prayer is the means by which the struggle to realise the destiny God has promised is conducted. This message states, therefore, that salvation is attained only through ritual practice⁸. As I intend to demonstrate here, however, this message opens up a series of questions around the rituals to which the ritual practice itself responds.

Firstly, it affirms that prayer is a spiritual weapon. This, then, leads to the question of how to forge and articulate a lethal prayer in such a way that it can break through into the invisible world. Secondly, the ritual asserts that God has made for us a promise of prosperity that concerns our worldly existence and that through prayer can be realised. It is a promise, therefore, that ties together the Word of God, prayer and present time. This leads to the question of how this relation can be practiced within the spiritual war, and, leading on from here, of what the implications would be for this relation if the promise does not become a reality within our time on earth.

To illustrate how these questions are raised and then resolved in ritual practice, I will use my own observations of a service held in a Rome branch of MFM. More specifically, I will demonstrate the ways in which ritual working on the Scripture generates and forges prayer-weapons, a process that takes as its starting point the declamation of biblical verses. I will show how the process that begins with a Bible reading and ends with prayer is aimed at realising the Word of God, sparking a tension between the present and the past⁹ which, despite being profoundly influenced by Pauline messianism (Robbins 2010), configures its own distinctive relation between salvific promise and individual existence. Indeed, we will see how the ritual seeks to wrestle back from the powers of Satan in the invisible world a de-

⁸ Daniel Albrecht's observations (1999: 21-22) on charismatic spirituality would be applicable here: the term "ritual", like its conceptualisation, is rejected as unspiritual, despite the fact that rituals play a fundamental part in the religious life of Pentecostal Christians. Indeed, this refusal corresponds to a condemnation of religious practices considered exterior, formulaic or inauthentic, that do not require, in other words, the believer to involve both body and soul in the practice.

⁹ Much literature is available on the relationship between past and present and on temporal and historical continuity/discontinuity in Pentecostalism, but some good examples of different interpretations on the topic are: Meyer (1992, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1999); Van Dijk (1992, 1998); Devish (1998); Maxwell (2000); Casanova (2001); Cole & Middleton (2001); Tonda (2002); Robbins (2003, 2007, 2010); Ellis & ter Haar (2004); Engelke (2004, 2010); Harris (2006); Marshall (2009; 51-91); Pype (2012: 215-249); Daswani (2015).

stiny for the here and now, by means of contextualising the promise of the Word of God within the worldly lives of the faithful. To achieve this end the ritual transforms the worshipper into an aggressive producer of prayers, involving her¹⁰ both corporally and vocally until she reaches a “burning spiritual temperature”. The worshipper thus actualises divine promise, becoming the spiritual warrior able to realise her supernatural destiny.

The main part of the article will focus on an analysis of the core of the pastor’s sermon as it is during this sequence of the service that the Bible is worked on for ritual purposes. Indeed, I will show that the sermon is more than merely an exposition of the biblical teachings relating to a specific theme. It produces effects not simply because it persuades and converts (Harding 2000), demonstrating the truth of the Bible text, but because it transforms the Word of God into an effective tool: «wherever I pray [...] people receive [blessings]», the pastor affirms. The charism of his words is therefore transformative, as they intend to generate changes in people’s lives that will make real the promise contained in the Bible verses selected for the sermon.

In his analysis of Olukoya’s biblical commentary *The Prayer and the Deliverance Bible* (2007), Paul Gifford (2016) has shown how, within the text, an understanding of the Bible emerges that is distinctive to the Pentecostal approach to the Scriptures more broadly. The Scriptures are interpreted as a contemporary document that records the commitments (covenants, promises, pledges) God means to be realised in our worldly lives. This interpretation thus lends to a performative and declarative use of the Bible, so that in many cases sermons seem to be a «ritualized working, picking up the key words, and playing on them constantly» (Gifford 2008: 214).

By investigating this ritualised working, I aim to bring to light the ways in which this transforms Bible verses into prayer, contextualizing the biblical fragment within the present to render effective the promises contained within. This ritual work connects Bible reading and prayer in a unique relation. As Robin Shoaps (2000: 35) has observed, for many Protestant communities there exists an explicit tension between personal and spontaneous prayer on the one hand, and «the invocation of durable prior texts like songs and Bible verses» on the other. In the cases of the two Assembly

¹⁰ I have chosen to use female pronouns when talking about the worshipper in the abstract, also because in a part of the service, as I will show in the article, when the congregation divides itself into men and women, I only took part in the women’s section of the meeting.

of God churches in California and Michigan used by Shoaps for her study, this tension is resolved through a strategy of text-building that emphasises the appropriateness of durable prior texts to the present moment, in order to contextualise them in the same way that spontaneous prayers are contextualised.

A similar strategy can be traced in the sermon that I analyse here. When reading the Bible, for example, the pastor places particular emphasis on certain words. At other points, he invites the congregation to re-read the text with conviction so that they can make it truly their own. However, as we will see, this contextualisation of the verses in the present is only fully complete when the worshippers in attendance conjugate the biblical verse, now transformed by the pastor into a prayer, in the first person. In contrast to the examples given by Shoaps, this ritualised working on the Scripture seems to break down all distinctions between formulaic and spontaneous language. It transforms the verse in prayer, a prayer that is formulated according to recurring syntactic structures and grammatical parallels. Nevertheless, from the moment the verse is first recited, the formulation of the prayer fully involves the individual believer: mind, body and spirit are mobilised to pray with aggressive intention.

What this demonstrates is not that “protestant sincerity” is absent but rather that the “authentic” subject, that recites spontaneous personal prayers, is here constructed through the ritual context of spiritual warfare. In this sense, I do not intend to imply that the meaning of “sincerity” is universal or unvarying within the protestant tradition¹¹. Rather, I wish here to interpret the meaning that the necessity of enunciating personal and spontaneous prayers takes on within spiritual warfare. In fact, the worshipper becomes her “true self” in the here and now, the supernatural self-promised by the Word of God: a burning-hot spiritual warrior fighting the powers of Satan.

The circle of prayer warriors in the Hour of Solution

The ethnographic data presented in this article have been taken from fieldwork I have been carrying out since 2016 in the Rome branch of the MFM. During the course of my fieldwork I became, from 2017 onwards,

¹¹ For the problematical use of the term “sincerity” in ethnographic research see: Duranti (1993) and Rosaldo (1982).

a regular attendee of both the Sunday and weekday services which, being held in English¹², are mainly attended by churchgoers of Nigerian origin, though there are to a less extent worshippers originating from other African states (e.g. Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Cape Verde)¹³.

In this article, I do not intend to focus on the role of the MFM in the everyday life of its believers or the meaning that its religious message has to them in their biographical and migratory trajectories. Rather, I intend to focus on their involvement in the rituals of the MFM. In so doing, I want to highlight the ritual work on the Bible and the self in the context of the spiritual warfare.

To this end, I will describe in particular an Hour of Solution that took place in April of 2016. The Hour of Solution is the Thursday service where MFM churchgoers – generally no more than 40¹⁴ – take part in a ritual aimed at obtaining radical change in their lives: the “solution” to existential circumstances that reveal the nefarious influence of Satan’s powers. This change is sought through a ritual process composed of two very distinct sequences, the second of which is marked by the entrance of the pastor, who then takes his place at the altar to deliver a sermon. At the service in question the sermon was dedicated to the solution of the specific spiritual problem of the lack of “promotion”. Lack of promotion was here understood to mean lack of the promotion that God has promised to Christians as a worldly destiny of prosperity in the Scripture. This theme allows us to illustrate, therefore, the ways in which ritual work on the Scripture is used to render the Bible’s promise effective. We see here, furthermore, how the ritual seeks to provide answers to questions raised by existence, with

¹² However, the Sunday service is almost always translated by interpreters into French or Italian.

¹³ In 2018 I also took part in the intensive course – held by pastors sent from MFM’s headquarters in Lagos – which was intended to promote both spiritual growth in believers through a perfecting of their prayer practices and in-depth Bible study (*Biblical & Prayer Lectures*), and proselyting activities through the formation of missionaries and evangelists (*Mission & Evangelism*).

¹⁴ The other weekly service, the Spiritual Clinic, takes place on Tuesdays and is dedicated to Bible study and collective prayer aimed at resolving the spiritual problems affecting individual believers. The Sunday service is on average attended by around 200 people. The congregation is generally gender balanced, both at the Sunday and weekday services. At the Sunday services there are also often children and young adults of between 20 and 30 years of age (both men and women), especially in the choir. However, the group that is most active in all services is made up of around a dozen women between 30 and 60 years of age.

its experiences of frustration and failure, in response to this message of salvation centred on worldly success.

Even before the pastor began his sermon, worshippers had been engaged in the process of obtaining the “solution” for around half an hour, fighting as prayer worriers against those spiritual “enemies” that obstruct the realisation of divine promise. At this point, as per the routine, the congregation divided itself into men and women, with the two groups arranging themselves into circles each guided by a single expert warrior. The women’s circle was composed of around 15 women, between 30 and 60 years of age, who were active members of the church. M., a churchgoer of around 60 years, had opened the collective prayer by announcing the following sentence or “prayer point” – as these types of enunciation are generally defined – from the centre of the circle: «every arrow that comes from the house of my father, stop and go back. In Jesus’s name!». The prayer point was immediately repeated several times with the same aggressive tone by the other women, accompanied by brisk arm gestures, some of them even stamping their feet on the ground at the pronunciation of Jesus’s name. These arm gestures seemed to have the intention of hitting something directly in front of the women, while the stamping feet seemed to insist on an immediate impression of the potency of Jesus’s name.

Next, M.’s firm and fierce voice took up the phrase «every arrow that comes from the house of my mother, stop and turn back, in the name of Jesus!». Again, the same movements were repeated obsessively by the women, movements that demonstrate that these invisible arrows, ordered to turn back, were spiritual attacks that churchgoers had to defend themselves from in that precise moment. On other occasions when worshippers had to launch counter-attacks against Satanic “powers”, arm movements were directed at an invisible trajectory coming from above. Perhaps because, as it was explained to me¹⁵, Satan controls the second sky, and it is from here that he launches his attacks and blocks the blessings sent to Christians from the first and higher sky. Notwithstanding, the warrior’s movements presented these arrows and powers not so much as cosmological elements but principally as attacks, and, therefore, as actions.

¹⁵ This theme has been the object of various informal conversations on the margins of the rituals. In particular, it was explained to me that the rebel angel Lucifer, after having been chased out of God’s sky (Isaiah 14: 11-15), had established his stronghold in the sky between heaven and earth.

«Every bad plantation planted in me against my glory and my destiny, get out! Uproot! Out, out! Uproot, uproot!», at the sound of this new pronouncement made by M., the bodies of the warriors reacted by shaking themselves as if they were trying to release something, with eyes closed and arms moving as if to “uproot” something in their stomach or head. Then again, the violent gestures began to be directed outwards: «every arrow or power that comes from my country to disturb my growth, Jesus will not let me lose!». «God rise up and respond with fire! Fire of the Spirit burn, burn!». If the repetition of Jesus’s name was intended as a spiritual weapon, an action in the invisible world, so the warriors called on God and the fire of the Holy Spirit in the imperative, demanding him to intervene with immediate effect. Indeed, it was at this point that M. announced her vision, opening her eyes and pointing out of the church: «the arrows have been stopped here at the threshold». Then followed a new imperative, this time accompanied by an inclination of the torso towards the earth and by movements of the arms from low down towards the body: «my glory buried in the village come out! Come out, in the name of Jesus!».

The Pentecostal «desire for personalized religious experience» (Shoaps 2002: 35) in this spiritual battle expresses itself through participation in a struggle for the worshipper’s destiny, a destiny that has been promised and that the worshipper, therefore, claims for herself. This destiny is not only portrayed as having been buried but also, in other Hour of Solution services, as something stagnant or blocked by spiritual entities that, as we have already observed, are not only cosmological elements but primarily actions of movement, and as such entities that have a direction, an origin and a destination: from the father’s house (or the mother’s) and from the country of origin to the place of arrival where the “growth” – or “promotion” as the pastor then termed it – is compromised. Alternatively, their actions are localised in a precise space: the village where the glory due by right to the warriors is buried. This village is not always meant to be understood as a real place of origin lying at the beginning of the migratory course. Not all of the women in the warriors’ circle come from rural areas. In this case, rather, the village is meant to be interpreted as that social condition that the migratory experience had promised would be left behind. This is also the place that embodies the colonial spectre of a primitive Africa where witchcraft, which in its Pentecostal version is an occult power of Satan, buries glory and divine blessing.

Similarly, the spiritual action of sending back the invisible arrows, towards the father’s house (or the mother’s) from where they came, does

not necessarily indicate an insoluble conflict with the family of origin. It is, rather, intended as change that was expected but not fulfilled, in terms of an improvement on the socio-economic conditions left behind. In this sense, it could be said that the conversion to Pentecostalism does not always act or express itself as a desire to break with the intergenerational bond (Meyer 1998b). The women gathered in the prayer circle that day have the intention of staying in Italy for the mid to long term (from approximately five to 20 years). Some of them would like, if and when they can afford it, to assist their parents back in Nigeria¹⁶. In these cases, then, “pushing back” the persecutory forces seems to in fact mean reinforcing that generational pact, which at the same time implies a discontinuity, or a “step up” on the social ladder for the younger generation that have left their country of origin.

If the prayer warriors read their social condition through the lenses of the invisible dimension, they also maintain that spiritual actions, though invisible, have social effects and consequences.

«If you have studied and you cannot find work, this is not normal! If you have been in Italy for ten years and you still live in a bedsit, this is not normal! If you work and you never have any money, this is not normal!». This was how M., during an Hour of solution, intended to encourage me after, observing my awkward behaviour and tepid approach that she evidently considered inadequate¹⁷. She was inviting me to participate in the prayer with greater feeling and conviction (and so, as we will see, to pray with greater efficacy). At the same time, M. saw in my behaviour a resignation and sought to use the occasion to bring to my attention – and to the attention of others – that this resignation was in her opinion part of the problem, both for me and others (who have not been able to find work, who live in bedsits, who do not have enough money). The asser-

¹⁶ The majority of them are employed in the health and social care sector, on either a permanent or precarious basis. In a minority of cases, they work in the service sector as waitresses.

¹⁷ Although I had consistently explained that the motivation for my participation in church activities was my research, in the eyes of the believers, of the pastor and of the teachers I represented a potential convert. This attitude was often explicit, as in the case I report above, when the worshippers standing beside me during the celebrations invited me to put greater conviction into my participation in the prayers, correcting the behaviour they saw as unconvincing. As far as the themes approached in this article are concerned, this encouragement and correction – more than my interviews and conversations with MFM churchgoers – helped me to understand how effective prayers are forged, as well as the nature of the relationship between prayer and Bible recital.

tiveness with which she repeated that these situations were not normal clearly indicated this. In her opinion these situations were unacceptable, but they were also the consequence of something “abnormal”, thus spiritual. It was, therefore, by both finding the conviction to be able to refuse these situations, and then by spiritually fighting, that the “solution” could be obtained.

M.’s exhortations also allowed me to understand that there was a discrepancy: while I was observing the invisible dimension – and the conflict that, according to the prayer warriors, pervades it – as a bodily practice, M. implied that spiritual action is not only embodied but also has traces in our existence, in the biographical trajectories of social (im)mobility experienced, in their case, in the course of migration. The spiritual entities (God, the Holy Spirit, Satan and the spirits he controls) have in this sense a social life (Espíritu Santo & Blanes 2014: 1-32).

At the same time, reflecting on M.’s words, I realised what the recital of a “spontaneous”, “sincere” and “personal” prayer meant to her. Indeed, the point of her reproach was not to get me to carry out a series of actions correctly (reciting with greater volume, stamping my feet and waving my arms with greater force). M. intended, rather, to say that the vehemence of a prayer derives from the refusal of failure, from not being resigned to the status quo. In other words, it derives from the total faith in the divine promise of prosperity that requires participation in the spiritual war. Thus, a prayer is “authentic” when it is effective, when it is intended, that is, to produce effects in both the spiritual dimension and in our existence, onto which it therefore projects an expectation of change.

Forging prayers

Taking the altar, the Pastor begins his sermon by noting that the word “promotion” appears twice in the Bible: Proverbs 3: 35 and Psalms 75: 6. Indicating the cardinal points laid out in the second verse the pastor reads it aloud and then asks the congregation to repeat it in chorus: «for promotion cometh neither from the East, nor from the West, nor from the South» (Psalms 75: 6)¹⁸. He then points upwards and proceeds to explain the verse’s significance: «God will promote you». As soon as the chorus of “Amen” and “Hallelujah” has died down, the pastor pronounces the fol-

¹⁸ The biblical citations in this article have been taken from the King James Bible used by the MFM.

lowing death sentence: «I decree: every power that says that God does not give promotion is a liar! Die! In the name of Jesus!».

«Witchcraft – he adds – cannot be promoted. Do not fear. The evil powers set against us have been nailed to the cross. Remind God that witchcraft has been nailed to the Christ’s cross». This truth to be remembered and declaimed was prophesied by Numbers 23: 23, which the pastor asks the congregation to read together and then repeat with greater conviction: «surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel: according to this time it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, What hath God wrought!».

«I say» continues the pastor solemnly «any enchantment against your promotion, die, in the name of Jesus!». The pastor’s pronouncement of this new sentence is aggressive. He invites the congregation to repeat it and in doing so they switch to the first-person possessive shouting: «any enchantment against my promotion, die!». Unlike the reading and repeating of the previous biblical passages, this death sentence is not pronounced in unison. Instead, everyone continually repeats the imperative “die!” without pause. As with the prayer warrior’s circle, some accompany it with violent gesturing of the hands or arms, as if they were trying to beat to death something just in front of them or above their heads. Other warriors, however, have more contained gestures and closed eyes as if they were killing something inside themselves. Underneath the concert of discordant voices the pastor continues to incite the congregation in a frenzied and violent manner: «prophesize!».

Then he raises his voice to overcome the cacophony of other voices and pronounces: «in the name of Jesus, we pray!». In unison the congregation responds «Amen!». «I decree – he continues – that any divination against your promotion scatter, in Jesus’s name!». As before, everyone then prophesies to themselves this verdict against divinations, this time insisting on the imperative “scatter!”. The aggressiveness or intensity of their gestures and voices demonstrates that these prayer points are intended as attacks against those spiritual powers that oppose God’s promotion and negate his power of promotion («[...] every power that says God does not promote [...]»).

Here the prophecy is intended to be more than simply a prediction or announcement of divine will. Rather, taking the form of a prayer point, it is a statement aimed at producing effects both in the spiritual world, killing or dispersing enemy forces, and in the visible world, by obtaining divine promotion in the lives of the faithful.

The prayer points are often introduced by declarative verbs (“I say,” or “I decree”) and are formulated by picking out certain words (“promotion”, “enchantment”, divination”) from the proposed biblical verses which are then transformed into performative pronouncements. The biblical verses are thus turned into effective prayer-weapons, like arrows or explosive bullets fired into the invisible world to kill spiritual enemies, namely, the powers of the occult and the forces of darkness ruled over by Satan. They are prophecies forged to kill and pronounced by evoking the power of Jesus’s name, they are subordinated to his authority: «in the name of Jesus, we pray!».

«Wherever I pray – here, in London, in Lagos, it does not matter where – people receive [blessings]». In this way, continuing with his sermon, the pastor fuses his charism to the efficacy of his prayer, almost as if to ward off any possible scepticism which, as was declared in the initial prayer point, is considered the voice of enemy powers. The pastor now seems to want to counter that Satanic voice, as if he were responding to questions invited by the lack of promotion: if I am born-again why have I not been promoted? Why do my prayers not obtain results?

Indeed, the pastor then recounts stories of people who came to him because they had been diligently going to church for ten years but had not received promotion. He explains that his response in this is to ask them to show him how they pray, because the problem is always that they do not know how, «their lives will not change», he concludes. «Why do you not pass the test? Why do you always fail?» he asks. Why, in other words, is your social identity so different from your destiny?

Lack of promotion is the result, therefore, of not praying correctly, of not having acquired the power of prayer. At other points, both the pastor and the other members of the church point to an unskillfulness with the Word of God as the cause of ineffectiveness in prayer.

Significantly, the emphasis is placed not so much on ignorance but on inexperience, to indicate that the primary element determining the effectiveness of prayer is whether the person is able to practically apply the Word of God, or rather, to become fluent in a spiritual combat technique that is capable of turning the Word of God into a lethal weapon of war. It is, then, precisely the ritual process of formulating the prayer points that demonstrates the relationship between the Bible and prayer. Through this process, as we have seen, Bible verses are reformulated and pronounced in performative ways to produce a real effect.

Following the choral reading the pastor often re-reads the Bible verse to emphasise some of the words by lingering over them, by using pauses, or by pronouncing them with a particularly vehement and solemn tone. Indeed, the reading of the verse is not done exclusively for the purpose of selecting words to form the basis of the prayer point; it is first and foremost a means for the believer to experience a profound assimilation of or intimacy with the biblical fragment. The purpose is for the faithful to let themselves be filled with the verse, or to submerge themselves in it, in order to reach a burning spiritual temperature. It is this incandescence that produces the aggressivity needed to pray correctly. In this way the assembly resumes the reading with newfound conviction. On these occasions the verses are not pronounced in unison, as each worshipper is focused on using pauses, on placing emphasis and on raising their tone of voice in particular places, following the pastor's example.

However, if the prayers are to reach their target the worshipper must know how to aim. The shots are fired at spiritual forces, but to arrive at the enemy they must circumscribe the area of the believer's existence, where frustrated needs and desires cluster and blockages and impediments lie.

Becoming submerged in the verses or allowing them to permeate you is also a way of appropriating them: understanding the biblical texts means knowing how to apply them to your individual circumstances. In this way, the prayer point reaches its complete form when the statements change to the first person, when they are launched at «any enchantment» or «any divination against *my* promotion».

The Scripture is believed to possess, therefore, the power to change earthly existence. Yet it is also read and appropriated on the basis of the believer's personal adversities. Being an expert of the Bible in this sense means knowing how to select verses that will allow those adversities to be defeated. The choice of Psalms 75: 6 is based on a search for the term "promotion", because the objective of that Hour of Solution, as the prayer points declared, was to annihilate the powers, enchantments and divinations opposing promotion.

Ritual working on the Word of God therefore sets in motion a hermeneutic circle linking Scripture and personal circumstances, that hinges on a specific understanding of the Bible as a text containing God's covenants, promises and blessings (Gifford 2008, 2016). And it is for this reason that the Bible's contents concern its readers: the promises made within it are directed at them, the Bible is a yardstick against which Christians must measure their existential circumstances and social identity, and if these

promises are to be realised, if they are to make changes in readers' lives, reader's involvement is required.

A Present of Expectation

«Witchcraft cannot be promoted. Do not fear. The evil powers set against us have been nailed to the cross. Remind God that witchcraft has been nailed to the Christ's cross». This is how the pastor revealed the promise contained in Numbers 23: 23. Against Jacob and Israel there are no enchantments or divinations. On us, therefore, witchcraft can have no effect. The evil powers have been nailed to the cross that has delivered Christians from them: they cannot be promoted or advanced, they cannot win against believers.

Through a repeated reading of the verse, its truth has been proclaimed and God has been reminded of its promise. The believers have let themselves be filled with this promise, it has been internalised and they have become burning-hot and ready to launch the promise, in the form of aggressive prayer, against the enchantments and divinations that impede promotion.

For the MFM faithful, the unfolding of the ritual sequence from the declamation of Bible texts to the recital of the prayer point traces, therefore, a linear relation between divine promise and a prayer-prophecy, forged to have effects, i.e. to realise the scriptural content in the present. However, if we try to rearticulate these sequences by grasping the nature of the temporal relation connecting the divine promise with its "realisation", we are confronted with a paradox. Indeed, though the evil powers have already been nailed to the cross, the prayer point prophecies their death and dispersion in the present. They are therefore defeated in this moment, shot dead by the same enunciation that condemned them. The salvific event is behind the believers, yet, as it is a promise, salvation is accomplished *hic et nunc*, in the spiritual war where Christians announce the defeat of the powers of Satan. The present is, therefore, defined by this promise and thus a distinctive relation is created between past and present. The salvific event of the past, apparently disproved by the necessity of salvation in the present, is in fact verified in the here and now.

The tension between the past and present seems to recall the notion of messianic time laid out by Paul of Tarsus in his letter to the Romans. Paul's messianic time is not the time of the Day of Wrath, it is not the apocalyptic last day (Agamben 2000: 62-65). Rather, messianic time is

present time. For Paul, the messianic event has already taken place with the resurrection of Christ. Messianic time is thus the “now time”, the time that has begun to end and will last until the *parousia*, that is, not until the return of the Messiah but until he becomes fully present.

According to Giorgio Agamben’s interpretation (2000: 69-71)¹⁹, Paul’s messianic time is the time that contracts itself as it begins to end. This contraction of the present time is due to the tension of expectation that permeates all of creation, as described in Romans 8: 16-19²⁰. In these Pauline verses we see that the “already” of the messianic event and the “not yet” of its full realization are bound together by an expectation that simultaneously ties present suffering to the future full manifestation of glory.

The present state of the spiritual war, as we have seen, is pervaded by a tension between expectation and frustration. The expectation is of a divine promotion from on high that will overcome enemy forces. The frustration is the sensation the pastor, during his sermon, invites believers to recognise in themselves with the words:

If you are stagnant then you are degrading. If you do not go forward, you are degrading. If everyone overtakes you, then you are degrading. If you do not progress to every stage in your life, then you are degrading. If your salary is always the same, then you are degrading.

Against this impasse, therefore, a series of violent prayer points are launched: «every power that makes you go backward, die!», «every evil throne

¹⁹ Mentioning authors like Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Robbins noted that «in certain high-visibility philosophical circles, the early twenty-first century has belonged surprisingly to Saint Paul» (2010: 633) meanwhile «a form of Christianity firmly rooted in Acts and in the Pauline epistles, Pentecostalism’s coming to global prominence has also been an event that, whether the new philosophical Paulines realize it or not[...] has given their models of Pauline revolution a worldly reference they would not have had previously» (Robbins 2010: 633). In this vein, I choose here to refer to the Agamben’s reading of Pauline notion of time, coming however – as I will show – to an interpretation of the Pentecostal messianic time that differ from the Robbin’s one.

²⁰ «The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:/And if children, then heirs; and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together./ For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us./ For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God» (Romans 8: 16-19).

against your advancement, burn in fire!», «every power that says that my past was better than my future, go insane!».

Every step forward, every advance, every improvement maintains the promise of salvation represented by the cross to which witchcraft is nailed. Witchcraft is therefore a power that pushes back, blocks, halts the progress of divine promotion's fulfilment in the present time.

Paul's messianic time is also the profane time of our present («in this present time» Romans 8: 18). This does not mean, however, that each day is better than the last, that this time unfolds as a succession of advances. Interrupted by the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of the messianic event, Paul's present time is the time for grasping the future *parousia*, i.e. full salvation. Thus, profane time is interrupted and radically transformed through contraction (Agamben 2000: 69-71).

«I see a highway that has not yet been built, but by the end of this month you will be driving straight down that highway!», the pastor prophesies, at the peak of his inspiration. In this sense believers are the heirs, with Christ, of divine glory, of its victory against witchcraft's enchantments and divinations. It is their right to speed down this highway before the end of this month, in this very present time. Everyone, after the announcement of this vision, is encouraged to decree the death of «every power that monitors and watches over your destiny», of «every curse against your destiny».

Profane time is, therefore, the time of individual existence that through salvation acquires the significance of destiny. It is, in other words, time orientated towards the fulfilment of one's God-given destiny on earth. The world we are living in is not refused or questioned because it is in this world that our God-given destiny will be realised. However, it is also true that a spirit of non-acquiescence prevails when a believer declares his divine destiny and defends it against spiritual enemies. «Stand your ground!» is one of the incitements that appears most frequently during the spiritual war prayers. «Possess your possessions!» is the meaning found in many Bible verses²¹. Defend what is already yours, obtain what is yours by right: you are God's heir, as Paul's verse proclaims.

²¹ Among them, for example, Obadiah 1:17: «But upon mount Zion shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; and the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions» and, in particular, Romans 8:17 «And if children, then heirs; and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together».

«Pray to see supernatural things, receive the supernatural power of Jesus!»: this last exhortation from the sermon on promotion sounds almost like a response. If the pastor had previously wanted to find a response to the frustrations provoked by the absence of promotion, now the implicit questioning seems to concern the fulfilment of personal destiny. «Pray [...] and receive» is also in this case the response. Because, as Psalms 75: 6 revealed, promotion does not come from the East, nor from the West, nor from the South. Promotion in this world does not come from this world but from on high, as the power to make our lived experience become destiny.

However, the pastor's plea also seems to contain responses to questions concerning our true nature and the nature of our destiny. The believer's destiny is, in fact, to overcome her spiritual enemies within her lifetime on earth and to be supernatural in this world. If the believer is blocked, if she goes backwards, if she is always overtaken by others, then she is not her real self because her divine destiny foresees for her a speeding down the highway of her existence.

In this sense, the Word of God reveals and transforms. Its power pervades the worshipper who, reciting it, is filled with its promise until she herself becomes – and so fulfils – this very promise of supernatural destiny: a warrior of incandescent prayers who kills the enemies that God nailed to the cross.

Conclusions: becoming the “Authentic” Subject of Spiritual Warfare

If we were to sum up Pentecostal conversion in one simple formula we could say that its message of salvation is «you have been saved. Save yourself!» It is a message that is entrusted primarily not to a theological discourse but to ritual practices (Csordas 1994, 1997; Albrecht 1999; Luhrmann 2004; Robbins 2009), like the MFM's Hour of Solution. By recounting this ritual, I have shown how the sequences through which spiritual warfare is conducted (the circle of warriors and the declamation of biblical verses) entail not only a performative use of language but also a practice of the Word of God that contextualises the biblical promise in the present, transforming it into prayer. As such, these ritual experiences are strongly influenced by a specific temporal configuration expressing the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of salvation.

Indeed, while identifying in this message a profound relationship with Pauline messianism (Robbins 2010), I have nevertheless shown that for

the actors engaged in spiritual warfare, the present time – that is the time between the “already” and the “not yet” of salvation – is understood as earthly existence of the individual to whom God promises supernatural success, as it must be won from Satan’s spiritual powers.

So though one of the biblical references most frequently used to guide the struggle in the invisible world is found in the Pauline letter to the Ephesians (6: 12)²², in contrast to Paul, the victory that the spiritual warriors are committed to is prosperity in the visible world and in the present time of their existence. Within the rituals of spiritual warfare, therefore, biblical promise and individual existence interweave to form a close-knit relationship, as these rituals are proposed as the solution to worshippers’ existential circumstances.

The imminence of this promise’s realisation introduces expectations and doubts, generating a continuous cross-referencing between the Scripture and existence. The Word of God transforms existence, but existence puts the Scripture’s promise to the test. If promotion has not yet arrived, in spite of conversion, it is because the believer has not yet learnt the correct prayer practice, and, therefore, is not experienced with the Word of God. Thus the reply given by the pastor to allay the doubts arising from conversion (Daswani 2015: 56-73) suggests that all doubts concerning the promise’s veracity come from Satan: «I decree: every power that says that God does not promote, you are a liar! Die, in the name of Jesus!».

Existential circumstances hence reveal the believer’s commitment to the promise. This commitment, however, is not relieved through obligatory compliance to ritualistic practices (Albrecht 1999: 21). Rather, the correctness of prayer resides in the worshipper’s aggressivity. When praying, the believer must reach a burning-hot spiritual temperature in order to conjugate a prayer point in the first person so that it becomes an effective weapon in the invisible world.

My analysis of the declamation of biblical verses has shown that this is the source from which the prayer points flow as performative statements that actualise the promises of destiny contained in the Scripture. In this way, the salvific event that lies behind the believers is made real in the present.

²² «For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places» (Ephesians 6: 12).

There is nevertheless a problematic aspect to this contextualisation in the present that in our laying-out of the pastor's argumentation has not yet come to light. The prayer points launched by the circle of spiritual warriors indicate that the past is not only that of the salvific event. It is, rather, a persecutory force that acts in the present and that originates in the country of origin, in the "village" and in the house of the father (or the mother). These places are not merely places of origin but, as we have seen, are, more importantly, disadvantageous socio-economic conditions (both personal and of the social groups of origin), from which migration abroad is supposed to guarantee a detachment, and which the women gathered in prayer should have left behind. As M. expressed: «if you have been in Italy for ten years and you still live in a bedsit, this is not normal!».

The past was therefore "presentified" by invisible agents taking part in the spiritual battle in which the women were engaged. This struggle with the past seems to cast doubt on the idea of time implied by the pastor's sermon, which, in contrast, had seemed to configure the present as individual existence oriented towards a progressive realisation of God-given destiny. This linear unfolding time is thus complicated by a past which spiritually acting on the present is not an inert dimension left behind.

Thus, on the one hand, the "abnormality" that M. sought to highlight indicated that the invisible powers have existential and social effects. Though on the other hand her assertive affirmation was not at all a resigned acknowledgement. On the contrary, M.'s statement was an imperative urging me to involve myself completely in the prayer as spiritual warfare. If satanic attacks against Christians are constant, if the past is spiritually in action in the present, withdrawal from the spiritual war is not possible, there is no point where the believer can feel saved once and for all. In this way, both for M. and for the pastor the existential circumstances do not contradict the promise of God – as Satan would have it – but, on the contrary, they indicate the necessity of being constantly engaged first hand in its realisation, as burning-hot agents of prayer fighting against incessant spiritual threats to win back their destiny.

By forging prayers points from the Bible, this actualisation implies that the biblical narration concerns the believer's existence not simply because its promise is to her: it concerns her as it involves her in a ritual practice that dissolves any distinctions between personal and spontaneous prayer on the one hand, and the invocation of a durable prior text like Bible verses on the other. Indeed, the Word of God has a transformative power not

only because it persuades and converts and thus produces effects (Harding 2000), but because its contextualisation in the present transforms the faithful into a warrior.

The declamation of the Bible, perhaps more clearly than with the warriors' circle, is the demonstration that becoming burning-hot agents of prayer is not only the result of becoming skilled in a bodily practice (declaiming with vehemence, making violent gestures), which would be the equivalent for the MFM churchgoers of a non-personal or formulaic prayer. Reading the Word of God – and hence internalising it in the most profound sense – creates a subject that, forging prayer points, is her true self inasmuch as she is a spiritual warrior fighting for her destiny. In the ritual moment of the prayer, she is the promise of being supernatural in this world. Not the person stuck in satanic social immobility but the subject that the Bible promised and revealed that she is, i.e. «joint-heirs with Christ» Romans 8:17.

In this sense, while the subject of the spiritual war is created through the ritual process, this promise also intends to demonstrate the falsity of existence, as it is the supernatural destiny that forms the basis on which a person's social identity is evaluated: «if you do not go forward», «if everyone overtakes you», «if you do not progress», «if your salary is always the same», then – the pastor affirmed – the life you are living is not your true destiny. This promise therefore lays down an imperative against resignation to an “abnormal” status quo (as M. emphasised), while at the same time transmitting a message of material prosperity as divine blessing. A message that invites worshippers to look to the social realm for evidence of the actions of satanic powers without renouncing the world but, on the contrary, acknowledging worldly success as the realisation of the biblical promise.

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