Crafting Ethiopia's Glorious Destiny

Pentecostalism and Economic Transformation under a Developmental State

Du destin glorieux de l'Éthiopie. Pentecôtisme et transformation économique dans un État développementaliste

Sobre el destino glorioso de Etiopía. Pentecostalismo y transformación económica en un Estado desarrollista

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Pentecostalism and Economic Transformation under a Developmental State

“Transformation” seems a key word to describe contemporary Ethiopia. The country hailed among African fastest growing economies witnesses rapid material transformation orchestrated by the government’s “Growth and Transformation Plan” (GTP) (FDRE 2010): urban infrastructures, roads, dams, investments in agriculture and manufacturing, new patterns of consumption. Beside this, a less tangible but equally significant transformation is taking place in the religious sphere: the spiritual renewal promoted by the Ethiopian Pentecostal movement (Haustein, Fantini, 2013). Pentecostals nowadays are the fastest growing religious group in a country shaped by the oldest African autochthonous Christian church – the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the official state religion until the 1974 Revolution – as well as by a historically rooted presence of Islam.

Scholars have extensively investigated the relation between economic success and Pentecostal faith, in Africa and elsewhere, highlighting the elective affinity between the neoliberal turn and the ethic of Pentecostalism, reputed to promote a spiritual message and social practices particularly conducive to entrepreneurship, development and economic prosperity. Dena Freeman (2012b and 2013) has pioneered the study of this relationship in Ethiopian rural contexts. The issue remains however a largely uncharted territory of research, as a consequence of the relative novelty of the studies on the Ethiopian Pentecostal movement and of the lack of research by political scientists and sociologists on business and economic growth in contemporary Ethiopia (Vaughan, Gebremichael, 2011: 12). Furthermore, while the expansion of Pentecostalism in Africa has been traditionally associated with neoliberalism and “the retreat of the State” (Strange, 1996), Pentecostals in Ethiopia are prospering in a context marked by the presence of a strong state that aims not only at controlling strategic economic sectors and resources, but also at orienting people’s lives towards national transformation and economic development. Therefore, which is the relationship between the subjective and social transformations featuring the Pentecostal expansion and the economic transformation currently reshaping Ethiopia?

To address these issues, the first section sets the scene by recalling the main features of the processes of economic growth and Pentecostal expansion in contemporary Ethiopia, and by highlighting what is distinctive about Ethiopia compared to the literature and other case studies on Pentecostalism, neoliberal globalisation, economic success and development in sub-Saharan Africa. The second section analyses the theological premises and the narratives of Pentecostal business ventures in contemporary Ethiopia. The third and fourth sections deepen the analysis with a case study of the Unic 7000 Church in Addis Ababa along with its business fellowship Absolute Value, among the most vocal of neo-charismatic and independent groups advocating an increased Christian presence in public affairs. Data and information were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation during five rounds of fieldwork in Addis Ababa between 2010 and 2014.

The growth of economy and Pentecostalism in contemporary Ethiopia: an elective affinity?

The unprecedented GDP growth – averaging 10.7 per cent per year in the last decade and the increase in official development indicators have earned Ethiopia the inclusion among the countries of the so-called “rising” or “emerging” Africa. If Ethiopia can sustain this historically impressive performance, it might reach middle-income status by 2025, as foreseen by the government in its ambitious plan for growth. The peculiarity of this process of economic growth lies in the fact that it is not driven by natural resources extraction, as in Angola or Chad, nor on private sector development, as in Kenya. The rise of Ethiopian GDP is mainly the result of a vast program of public investments in infrastructures like roads, dams, and housing, as well as of national policies aiming at boosting commercial agriculture and foreign investment in the agricultural and manufacturing sector. This strategy is based on the model of the developmental state, officially adopted in the last decade by the ruling coalition of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) – in power since 1991 after defeating the military *Derg* regime. With the GTP, EPRDF has opted for a neoliberal turn in rural development, shifting from the traditional focus on food security towards agriculture commercialisation. This shift entails the adoption of market liberalisation strategies both to support farmers in the development of micro and small enterprises, and to attract foreign investments on land and large-scale commercial agriculture, in order to create wealth and employment. However, the adoption of these neoliberal strategies does not imply a “retreat” of the Ethiopian state, but rather a reconfiguration of its intervention in the spheres of economy and development (Chinigò, Fantini, 2015).

The official government narrative on economic transformation and the growing opportunities offered by these processes nurture a widely shared culture of

expectation: people are eager to transform their lives by contributing to and partaking in the economic development that is taking place in the country. The break with the past promoted by the Pentecostal message appears among the factors that are cultivating such culture of expectation. In fact, in the last years Ethiopia's official statistics have recorded another unprecedented increase: that of the religious believers officially registered as Protestants – including members of traditional Evangelical and Pentecostal churches as well as new independent and (neo)charismatic groups – and vernacularly labelled as *Pente* to underline the charismatic renewal influencing the whole movement (Haustein, 2011b). In the national census statistics, the number of Protestants has grown from the 5.5% recorded in 1984, to the 10.2% in 1994 and finally up to the 18.6% in 2007, when Christian Orthodox and Muslims were respectively counted as the 43.5% and 33.9% of the population (Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission, 1994, 1998, 2008). The most recent projections suggest that Protestants in 2011 were 21% of the population (Central Statistical Agency, 2012), confirming them as the fastest-growing religious group in Ethiopia. This growth has been personified by the appointment as Prime Minister of Hailemariam Desalegn, the first Ethiopian Head of State with a Pentecostal background¹ (Haustein, 2013). While acknowledging its internal plurality I will refer to this group as a whole as Pentecostal because the charismatic turn influences the whole movement (Fantini, 2015) and the term is increasingly used as self-designation among Ethiopian Christians not belonging to the Orthodox or Catholic churches (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2010).

Pentecostals have taken advantage of the new institutional climate of religious freedom inaugurated by the EPRDF with the 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, which affirms the secular principle of separation and non-interference between state and religion (art. 11), the freedom of religious belief, expression and association (art. 27), and the authority of religious courts in several domains of personal life (art. 34 and 78). Pentecostals have become increasingly assertive in affirming their presence in public spaces, and “claiming Ethiopia to God” by reinforcing their commitment in state institutions, development initiatives and economic activities (Fantini, 2013). The fervour of Pentecostal activism and its aggressive proselytism strategies contribute to sharpen the relationship with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and between Christians and Muslims, fuelling polemics that in some cases unfolded in violent clashes (Abbink, 2011).

The growing presence of religion in public spaces and debates is increasingly perceived as problematic by the EPRDF. In spite of its secular approach, the government is particularly attentive in controlling religious groups and co-opting

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1. While highly symbolic at the level of religious imaginary, Hailemariam coming to power is mainly the results of political logics and internal dynamics within the ruling coalition (Fantini, 2013).

spiritual leaders to avoid the politicization of religious identity, to counter the emergence of potential competitors, and to ensure conformity to its political agenda (Haustein and Ostebo, 2011). In implementing this secular order, the government retains the prerogative to teach religious groups on constitutional rights and civic duties, and to influence their orientation with the goal of ensuring religious tolerance and combating religious “radicalisation”, “extremism” or “terrorism”.

The consonance between the Pentecostal message and the spread of neoliberalism has inspired a growing debate on the nexus between Pentecostalism, economic growth and development. Several analysis have revisited Max Weber’ Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, highlighting similarities and differences with the “elective affinity” between Pentecostalism, neoliberal economy and the “spirit of development” (Comaroff, Comaroff, 2000; Meyer, 2007; Freeman, 2012a). Freeman has applied these analyses to the Ethiopian context, emphasising the elective affinity between Pentecostalism and development in rural Ethiopia (Freeman, 2012b, 2013). She analyses how the Pentecostal holistic approach to development – “transformational development” that sees economic transformation strictly connected with subjective change – has proved particularly effective in promoting pattern of development and accumulation in rural contexts in Southern Ethiopia. Here, conversion to Pentecostalism facilitated the behavioural changes towards risk assumption and entrepreneurial attitudes, and a break with traditional kinship obligations, advancing individual accumulation by exploiting development opportunities offered by international NGOs.

I would like to contribute to this debate by focusing on Pentecostalism and economic transformation in the urban context of Addis Ababa. Pentecostalism in Ethiopia remains largely a rural phenomenon and most of the believers still belong to mainline Evangelical denominations (Dewel, 2014). However, it is worth focusing on the “new” or “independent” Pentecostal churches that cater the emerging urban upper and middle class: these groups are particularly vocal in reclaiming an increased public role for Christians, and are presumably better equipped to prosper in a context hyped as one of the most dynamic and fastest growing in the whole Africa.

In analysing this group, I situate the relation between Pentecostalism and economy by assessing the religious experience in the context of its “generalised mutual interaction” (Bayart, 2010) with economy, politics and society. In the Ethiopian case, this implies assessing Pentecostals’ involvement in economic affairs by looking at their interaction with the reconfiguration of the government intervention in economy. This analysis indicates that within this specific political and economic context Pentecostals are prospering with much more difficulties that one would expect – and that they themselves wish – despite their supposed elective affinity with neoliberal globalisation.

Pentecostal narratives on economic transformation

An ascetic attitude emphasising the separation between the spiritual and the secular realm and the consequent recalcitrance to get involved in public affairs historically characterised the Ethiopian Pentecostal movement. This apolitical stand was reinforced by the narrative and self-representation of the movement, emphasising the memory of the persecution suffered under the *Derg* and the resulting identification of politics and public affairs as a dangerous worldly thing (Haustein, 2011). In the last years, these positions have been increasingly challenged by a theological shift promoting a holistic approach to salvation and calling on Christians to become actively involved in the public arena in order to evangelise and transform the country. Taking advantage of the climate of religious freedom, a group of neo-charismatic churches and proactive pastors have been particularly vocal in reclaiming Pentecostals' visibility in public spaces and growing engagement in secular affairs, including economy and development.

This preaching has been applied as attempts to revitalise existing professional associations, like the Ethiopian Christian Graduates Fellowship, or to create ad hoc ministries, groups and networks dealing with economy and development. Almost all the main independent and neo-charismatic churches – such as Beza International Church, City of Refugee (formerly You-Go City) Church, Unic 7000, Exodus – have established their own fellowships targeting the business and professional communities.

This theological and practical shift implies a generation friction within the movement, but it is gaining influence also inside mainline denominations, as acknowledged by an elder of the *Mulu Wengel* Church, the first Pentecostal church established in the country:

My sons are going to Exodus church. They have a holistic vision: they want to get involved in the economy in order to transform the country. Their church is full of young, energetic and skilled people. They want to see the society transformed in all sectors: economy, politics, development... Their programs are much more ambitious than those of the traditional churches and their development wings, like ours. The mainline denominations are a little bit suspicious about the young churches, also because there is a fear from the past experience during the *Derg* time. But this attitude is spreading from the young churches to influence the whole Pentecostal movement².

The premises of this theological and practical shift promoted by Ethiopian “young”, “new” or post-denominational Pentecostal churches lie in a corrosive critique of the corruption governing the economy. Pastors insist on the need for Pentecostal involvement in the business sector in order to fight against its corruption and to bring righteousness according to Christian values and God's will. In some cases, the call assumes the tones of a crusade against a perceived Islamic

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2. Interview, Addis Ababa, 6 November 2012. The real names of most of the informants have been changed or omitted to protect their privacy.

control of the economy, most of the time personified by the Ethio-Saudi sheik Mohamed Al Hamoudi.

As it is often the case in most of the countries, the Ethiopian Pentecostal movement does not speak with a singular voice. The Ethiopian Pentecostals legitimize and encourage personal aspiration to worldly economic success by resorting to different theological approaches. A common denominator within the Ethiopian Pentecostal movement seems to be the general rejection of the prosperity gospel and the miracle-based approach emphasising the power of God in offering wealth and abundance to his people. The promises of wonders, miracles and easy money performed by foreign pastors visiting the country are mostly received with suspicion. These approaches are considered a degeneration of Christian doctrine and usually labelled as belonging to western African or American styles of preaching that are alien to Ethiopian tradition. However, inside the Ethiopian Pentecostal movement there seems to be an increasing trend to embody the prosperity gospel spirit in practice, for instance by adopting the language of marketing, and a growing interest in upward mobility – in the broader context of the culture of expectation above mentioned. Some of the Pentecostal groups catering to Addis Ababa's middle and upper classes increasingly display economic success as sign of blessing and righteousness of faith and behaviours.

Most of Ethiopian “new” Pentecostal groups adopt an approach linking economic success to spiritual and individual change. Consequently, the call to work for the transformation of the society passes through individual conversion and governing of the self: economic success is conceived as the result of the adherence to rigorous self-discipline and techniques of the body, control of desires, honesty, faith and prayers, but also hard work, technical knowledge and skills. Thus, economic success becomes part of the broader “remaking of the individual” inherent in the Pentecostal conversion (Maxwell, 1998: 352). Here the emphasis is on a double break with the past. On the one hand, a break with the ascetic ideals of mainline Evangelical churches, and with the suspicion of economic success and the lack of entrepreneurial mentality that permeate the Ethiopian society. On the other hand, a break with personal attitudes and behaviours described in terms of sin and corruption, towards the adoption of an ethic of purity and hard work. In this respect, the Pentecostal message of spiritual and economic empowerment implies the transition from a state of disorder to righteousness.

The promise of economic success combines born-again theology with notions borrowed from the manuals on management, consultancy, self-development and psychology. Consequently, Pentecostal churches and business fellowships offer training opportunities on entrepreneurial and managerial skills for their members. This training addresses both business basics (accountancy, management, marketing, leadership...) and moral and spiritual topics (business ethics, social responsibility, Bible study...). In addition, the fellowships promote networking

among church members, to uphold existing business and inspire the establishment of new ones, such as micro-finance institutions, banks, joint ventures... As explained by Pastor Johannes “Johnny” Girma, leader of the Exodus Apostolic Reformation Church,

The Church has to teach to work diligently. It has to teach entrepreneurship, in order to provide material means for transformation. God is a provider who cares for you, otherwise poverty affects also your spiritual transformation. Our God is a God of creativity, of development. An entrepreneur. We bring together capitals and vision, and they work together³.

By encouraging upward mobility and adopting the register of leadership, excellence and the fight against corruption, Pentecostals endorse the neoliberal narrative, echoing and legitimising the official Government’s discourse on the transformation of the country into a mature middle-income market economy. In focusing on individual transformation, Pentecostals do not seem concerned with structural changes within the political or economic systems. Moreover, their vocal attitude condemning the corruption of the current economic system and calling for good governance is balanced by the adoption of a patriotic message, announcing “an era of glory Ethiopia⁴” and echoing EPRDF official discourse on growth and transformation. As explained by Fitsum Negussie, Development Director at SACRED International Ministry,

Our objective is to offer a positive outlook on the current transformation that the country is experiencing. We encourage in particular the youth to participate in government efforts to transform the country, like those promoted in the Growth and Transformation Plan. We empowered the youth with leadership and excellency, reflecting the image of Christ in their life, in order to offer a positive contribution to their nation⁵.

However, despite a vocal discourse on the need to strengthen Christian values in the economy and apart from a few local success stories, the development of a flourishing Pentecostal business community at national level has not yet materialised. First of all, these efforts have suffered the effects of the internal fragmentation within the Pentecostal movement, which makes it hard to coordinate the work of Churches and para-churches organisations or to establish a unitary businessmen fellowship.

Moreover, these shortcomings are attributed to an attitude of suspicion within the movement towards the involvement in the business sector, or to a lack of appreciation of its importance, as well as to the difficulties of honestly competing in a market where other players – including Christian themselves –

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3. Interview, Addis Ababa, 23 March 2011.

4. This was the title of the first Evangelical Churches and Para Churches fair, held in November 2012. The same expression is also the title of a popular book that collects the prophecies of pastor Belina Sarka, anticipating by ten years the economic and infrastructures transformations currently undergoing in the country.

5. Interview, Addis Ababa, 8 November 2012.

recur to fraudulent practices. As acknowledged by Pastor David of the City of Refugee Church,

Pentecostalism is a relationship with God rather than a religion. Everybody that has a direct relationship with Jesus is a productive person, a good citizen, and a hard worker with a caring attitude towards the family and the nation. God is a God of prosperity who works hard. Therefore also in Ethiopia *Pentes* can help in transforming the country: we need a productive and educated society. But I do not see a contribution by Christians as much as I would like. Why? Some people are not totally committed. As Christian we should have integrity, but because of our culture people do not always respond to their word. There is lack of integrity, due to the prevalence of traditional culture. There is a lack of attitude to renew our mind according to the word of God. Christians are still going for shortcuts in business. Sometimes is very difficult to be honest, when everybody around is corrupted. You need deep spiritual change⁶.

Finally, Pentecostal business endeavours have to deal with the contradictory approach of the EPRDF to both religious and economic liberalisation. On the one hand, the government institutionally authorises spaces for religious and economic freedom. On the other hand, the EPRDF aims at controlling such spaces, perceiving both religious actors and private economic entrepreneurs as potential competitors in terms of popular legitimacy and support. In doing this, the EPRDF does not seem to fully grasp – and consequently does not accommodate – the quest for freedom and autonomy engendered among the population by its own policies of economic and religious liberalisation. Thus, in the name of the secular state, it constantly tries to keep religion separated from economic and development issues, minimising and controlling the spaces for religious actors to intervene in public affairs. At the same time, in the name of the developmental state, the EPRDF retains a prominent presence in key economic sectors by controlling the public enterprises and the private companies owned by the party affiliated foundations such as EFFORT. These policies leave only a marginal role to play for independent business networks, and discourage them from marking their activity as explicitly religious. As explained by Mekonnen, chairman of the Christian Centre Church Mission Businessmen Fellowship,

In the Ethiopian context, officially displaying your religious affiliation when doing business might not be a wise economic strategy. Our vision is to play as businessmen and professional an important role in the growth and transformation of the country, as stated in the government plan, the GTP. However, the government does not perceive the private sector as its main development partner and does not encourage it. Therefore it is difficult to measure the practical contribution by Pentecostals to the economy.⁷

Indeed, within the Addis Ababa business circles there are several entrepreneurs, owning malls, hotels, private schools or companies, whose Pentecostal background is widely known. However they do not publicly display their faith

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6. Interview, Addis Ababa, 3 May 2012.

7. Interview, Addis Ababa, 27 April 2012.

and their networks. Those who are the most vocal and active in affirming themselves as Christian businessmen appears to be also the ones that find themselves in the position of outsiders, both inside the Pentecostal movement and in the broader national political economy. An example of this situation is the Unic 7000 Church in Addis Ababa and its Absolute Value Fellowship.

The Unic 7000 Church: advancing governmental prayer and spiritual warfare in Ethiopia

The Unic 7000 Church is an independent Christian neo-charismatic church founded in 2001 by Pastor Abby Emishaw. It has around 1200 registered members, those regularly participating in Church activities. But the effective number of people attending varies considerably given the high spiritual nomadism among believers within the Ethiopian Pentecostal movement. The Church mainly caters to Addis Ababa's upper and middle class: among its members are lawyers, professionals, businessmen, Ethiopians working in foreign embassies or international NGOs, and a few politicians. Believers belong to different ethnic groups, and ethnicity does not seem to emerge as an identifying or divisive factor within the Church, as acknowledged by Pastor Abby:

We believe in the teaching that we are one in Christ. Ethnicity is not a Biblical notion. The Bible says "there is no Greek, there is no Roman, there is no Jewish, but we are all one in Christ." We teach these things and we are cautious in not emphasising ethnic divides⁸.

The Church main premises are located at the beginning of the Wollo Sefer Road, in proximity of the commercial and residential area of Bole Road. It also has branches in the towns of Gondar, Ambo, Hosaina and Debre Zeyt. In recent years, the Church has also opened branches abroad, in Minnesota, Denver, Washington DC, Los Angeles and Rome. While catering almost exclusively to Ethiopian nationals, the Unic 700 Church holds regular services in English on Wednesday afternoon, and occasionally on Sunday.

The Unic 7000 Church belongs to the group of independent and neo-charismatic churches that within the Ethiopian Pentecostal movement calls for a more visible and prominent presence by Christians in public spaces and public affairs. In terms of membership these churches are still a minority compared to the mainline churches such as the Lutheran *Mekane Yesus* (EECMY) or the (largely) Baptist *Kale Heywet*. However, in the last years these endeavours have proven rewarding: by virtue of their vocal attitude, their financial means, their organisational capacities and the charisma of their leaders, these "new" churches have attracted followers and gained influence. For instance the Unic 7000 Church initially grew outside the main institutional body encompassing Evangelical and Pentecostal

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8. Interview, Addis Ababa, 17 March 2011.

Churches, the Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE). Pastor Abby founded and lead a parallel fellowship, the Pastors Fellowship of Ethiopia. The recent admission of the Unic 7000 Church to the ECFE and Pastor Abby's appointment to its board have been hailed by Unic 7000 believers as a confirmation of the Pastor's charismatic influence and of the Church's leading role in advancing Pentecostal public presence by dint of crusades, evangelism conferences, or mass-prayers at Addis Ababa national stadium. Through these activities, the Unic 7000 Church – together with other neo-charismatic independent churches – introduces to Ethiopia notions and practices borrowed from North American or Nigeria Pentecostalism, such as spiritual warfare and governmental prayer (Marshall, 2009).

For the Unic 7000 Church, governmental prayer is prayer that engages with the nation and its spiritual direction as a whole. In order to address “the totality of holiness”, the church is organised into groups and fellowships that deal with different aspects of spiritual and social life. The spiritual ministries are in charge of worship services; they include the “Global Worship Ministry” formed by professional musicians “to reform the worship style through modern music and also to counter the abuse of this art,⁹” the governmental prayer groups, and the discipleship groups. The Evangelism department is responsible for the organisation of crusades, conferences and public prayers. It runs also the youth church on Saturday afternoon, a training program for 1 to 1 evangelism and a 3 times per week TV programme broadcasted from a London-based satellite channel (Tuesday and Saturday in Amharic, and Wednesday in English).

In addition to these activities there are several fellowships targeting specific groups and developing the practical skills of believers “to advance the Kingdom of God in all the sectors of the society”: a fellowship on gender identity and roles; a community action fellowship offering social services such as free medical treatment through the voluntary work of the Church's professional (medical doctors, nurses...); a fellowship targeting the business community, the Absolute Value Fellowship (described below); the EQUIP (Ethiopia Quickens Under Inspired Professionals) JoDan (Joseph and Daniel) Fellowship “organising the Church's emerging and established professionals, working for example in universities or private firms, to become agents of national transformation by excelling in their profession and acquiring influent leadership position¹⁰”.

In line with the governmental prayers paradigm, through these structures the Church promotes the active involvement of pastors and believers in public affairs in order to transform spiritually and materially the country according to God's will, as explained by Pastor Abby:

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9. Unic 7000 Global Worship Ministry member, interview, Addis Ababa, 7 November 2012.

10. All the quotes of the paragraph are taken from interviews with EQUIP JoDan Fellowship members, Addis Ababa, 7 November 2012.

We pray for our nation, to redress current situations where our nation is affected by evil forces. According to the Scriptures, we believe that the reality of the present is not just the product of historical conditions, but it has also a deep relationship with the spiritual realm. That is why we engage ourselves in spiritual warfare: we believe that there are spiritual agents of evil and Satan, principles and powers. We engage through governmental prayers those evil forces that influence the institutions, the systems and the leaders of the nation. We have really seen a great change through our prayer efforts. Many things have happened. For instance during the 2005 elections the situation was very volatile. We fasted and prayed through governmental prayers, because the country was divided in half and the intent of the enemy was to steer us toward civil war. People were predicting ethnic tensions and politicians telling that the next Rwanda was going to happen. So we prayed and we saw God changing things. It was a miracle to avoid such chaos¹¹.

The Church's commitment in public affairs also includes direct collaboration with government institutions such as the Anti-Corruption commission or the Ombudsman on "ethical issues" related to leadership, good governance and corruption. On these sensitive issues – significantly, out of bounds for "international" NGOs¹² – the Church also offers training for political leaders, particularly in the Southern regions where Pentecostalism is the predominant religion, but also in other areas.

The adoption of a technical and moral register of good governance and the fight against corruption might indicate an accommodating attitude toward the government and give the impression that Pentecostals endorse and legitimise its agenda. However, the epistemological challenges to the secular state and its analytical categories posed by governmental prayer (Marshall, 2009) do not seem to be fully grasped by the Ethiopian government itself. As admitted by Pastor Abby,

When we initially presented our annual work plan to the Government authorities, they told us: "What is this governmental prayer? Do you pray for the government?" We explained them but they told us to change the name into "spiritual warfare." So we just changed the name of our project. We have not experienced other questions by the government on this issue. The establishment is not bothered by us, because they do not think we are powerful, just fanatics¹³.

The next section analyses how the principles of spiritual warfare and governmental prayer are applied in the economic sector by the Unic 7000 Church's business fellowship.

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11. Interview, Addis Ababa, 17 March 2011.

12. In Ethiopia NGOs receiving more than 10% of their budget from foreign sources are registered as "international" and are not allowed to work in sensitive political sectors, such as human rights, advocacy, conflicts resolution.

13. Interview, Addis Ababa, 17 March 2011.

The Absolute Value Fellowship: spiritual warfare under the developmental state

The Absolute Value Fellowship is a Christian businessmen group created in 2004 by a group of young people belonging to the Unic 7000 Church. As explained by Tesfaye, one of the Fellowship founders and its current coordinator,

The Fellowship' name refers to a mathematical formula that makes negative numbers become positive. It means that there are no relative values and that everything that passes through is positive. We are showing the positive aspects of life. Everything has a value. And the ultimate value is the blood of Jesus Christ: this is the absolute value that God gave us¹⁴.

Initially, the founders tried to register the Fellowship officially as an NGO. However, after several years the registration process is not completed yet, because, as Tesfaye admitted: "The word Christian linked with business has posed difficulties for the public authorities. Therefore up to now the Fellowship remains as a department within the main church¹⁵."

The Fellowship has around 150 members, involved at different degrees in the activities. Only a minority of the members, around 30, are full-fledged entrepreneurs, mainly involved in small business in the retail sector. The others are employees or professionals (architects, lawyers...). Most have joined the fellowship to pursue their vision of starting their own business in the near future. By virtue of its membership and of the scope of its initiatives the Absolute Value Fellowship seems one of the most structured business fellowships within the Ethiopian Pentecostal movement.

The Fellowship activities fall within the broader Unic 7000 Church mission of "claiming the nation to God by transforming the society in all its sectors and aspects". Specifically, the vision of the fellowship stems from the principles of governmental prayer and spiritual warfare applied to the realm of economy. Emphasis on the performative power of prayers and on a miracle-based approach to wealth, constitutive of the governmental prayer and the spiritual warfare, is combined with reference to the need for an ethic based on hard work, honesty, competence and excellence. In my first encounter with the Absolute Value Fellowship, in May 2010, its members described their strategy in terms of individual empowerment and direct engagement in business, in order to be role models inside the Church and become more influential within the broader society. Initially, the fellowship had three main projects: a school for business and entrepreneurship, a financial investment, and a real estate project.

The idea behind the business school was the need to promote a new mentality and to offer the skills to compete in the market, both in spiritual and material

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14. Interview, Addis Ababa, 24 May 2010.

15. Interview, Addis Ababa, 10 March 2011.

terms, in order to drive both the individual and the economic system from moral and economic corruption towards righteousness and success. In the words of the fellowship's coordinator,

"God wants everybody to be prosperous". But here in Ethiopia we need to transform the Christian attitude towards wealth: before Christians used to consider wealth as a sin, so they refrained from getting involved in business. Today there are more such ventures, because the mentality of people has changed as a consequence of so many teaching on prosperity and success (*ibid.*).

The three-month training program offered by the Absolute Value Fellowship addresses three main domains. First, there are sessions addressing the pure technical entrepreneurial skills (management, marketing, accounting, how to draft a business plan...); second, there are sessions dealing with what is called "the motivational empowerment," looking at issues such as leadership, networking, corporate social responsibility, and personal character for entrepreneurship; third, there is the "spiritual package," whose topics include "The kingdom of God and business world", "The foundation of economy in the Scriptures", "The master of money" and "The fight against the sin behind corruption." Moreover, the school itself represents a profit initiative, since the trainees pay for their courses.

The second project entailed a bank investment. The Fellowship organised a group of investors, the "G100", and collected money to buy shares of the Wegagen Bank, a private bank in Addis Ababa. The idea was to use the dividends to fund the Church activities, and in particular its social projects, such as the church's medical missions for the poor.

The third project was a real estate business. The Absolute Value Fellowship coordinated a venture between different companies of Christian businessmen, the Ararat Estate Company, and secured a plot of land in the area of Sebeta, in the outskirts of Addis Ababa, with the goal of building a residential complex. Members of the Unic 7000 Church and of other Pentecostal churches, including the Ethiopian diaspora, were invited to invest money and buy houses in the complex. As explained by one of the founder of the estate company,

The most important aspect is that we are building not only houses, but an apostolic community, trying to depict the Christian values at community level; that's why the selection of buyers is done by the Church. The idea is not to build a close circle, but rather a community giving an example. In the second stage, once the company is strong, we aim to give affordable houses to the masses¹⁶.

A year later, in 2011, the only activity that was effectively running was the business school. The other two projects had been deeply affected by changes in national policies and regulations governing credit and land issues. In the previous months, the government issued a new regulation on private banks, imposing restrictive conditions on loans – banks were obliged to buy State bonds for an

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16. Interview, Addis Ababa, 23 May 2010.

equivalent to the 20% of the loan's amount – that hampered access to credit and limited the private banks' profits. Thus the G100 investors had to rethink and downsize their plans, as one of them admitted:

The idea behind the G100 was not to get access to loans, but to buy shares of the bank for profit. But there is a very tough legislation against the private banks, therefore it is no longer a safe investment. And we cannot take a risk with the money of the Church¹⁷.

The difficulties in access to credit affected the real estate project too. Ararat Estate could not cope with the fierce competition and speculation in the Addis Ababa urban land market. In Ethiopia, the government retains ownership over land and allocates it to private citizens through lease agreements. In urban contexts, the government fixes and periodically reviews in the master plan the kinds of buildings and investments required in specific areas and plots. The leasers unable to comply with the requirements might have their land confiscated, with compensation or reallocation in a less valuable plot. In the last years, this policy has led to the concentration of Addis Ababa's best land in the hands of the few investors with the right connections, enabling the mobilisation of capital required by the government's plans for urban land enhancement. Thus in 2012 the real estate project was still blocked, with the Absolute Value coordinator admitting that

Land leasing in urban areas has become very expensive. The entrance barrier is getting higher. Therefore also our real estate project might take a little longer that we initially foresaw. So far we are not progressing because doing business in Ethiopia is a big challenge. You cannot be sure of your long-term plans because of unpredictable laws. This does not allow you to think strategically. Enacting the law without consulting and without proper representation: this is the developmental state approach! You cannot predict the law unless you are an insider, and you cannot prosper unless you are linked to the Party. The idea of the developmental state is to fill the gap that the private sector cannot fill. But by doing it like this they are thwarting the private sector. They control all the capital and take all the projects¹⁸.

The dominance of the economy by state and party affiliated enterprises, and the perception of an government antagonism towards the private sector, frustrated and reshaped the Absolute Value Fellowship's plans and ambitions to contribute to and partake in the country's economic transformation. In May 2014, the Fellowship coordinator informed me about the decision of putting on hold all the projects except for the business school¹⁹.

While in mere economic and material terms the Absolute Value Fellowship endeavours might be considered as a failure, they acquire a different perspective when interpreted according to the spiritual rationale of governmental prayer. In

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17. Interview, Addis Ababa, 30 March 2011.

18. Interview, Addis Ababa, 6 November 2012.

19. Interview, Addis Ababa, 21 May 2014.

Pentecostalism people might also find a response to navigate the uncertainty of politics and economy in contemporary Ethiopia. Thus, in spite of the shortcomings of its business endeavours, the Absolute Value Fellowship still promotes a positive outlook at the current process of economic transformation and an acquiescent stand towards its master, the Ethiopian government. As acknowledged by the Fellowship coordinator,

In Ethiopia there is an undeniable economic growth and we are happy with that, even if as Pentecostals so far we are not contributing that much. But we are contributing as individuals. Pentecostals are rising and if some space will be allowed, in the near future they will be a very good resource for the nation. In Ethiopia the private sector is very young, it lacks spirit of entrepreneurship and creativity and it is still dominated by corruption. People work according to the old mentality. They are afraid of risk; they are rent seekers. Pentecostalism on the contrary is a young movement that can provide business people with the right values to succeed. You know the famous theory about the ethic of Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism. The country needs a new generation of businessmen. We are praying for this. Governmental prayer is a prayer to change the system, including the economy. But the effects might be seen in one or two generations. It is not in our hands, but in the hands of God. We know and believe that our efforts and prayers would decide the destiny of the nation, more than those sitting in the government. We believe that God has chosen Ethiopia and through His help and work we can contribute to craft a glorious destiny for our country and the entire World (*ibid.*).

These words powerfully recap the ambivalent relation between Pentecostalism and economic transformation from the perspective of “new” churches catering to Addis Ababa’s upper and middle classes. On the one hand Pentecostalism nurtures a strong “culture of expectation” and desire to partake in the economic development of the country, echoing and adopting the EPRDF official discourse (as for instance evident in Tesfaye’s use of the EPRDF archetypal description of private entrepreneurs in terms of “rent seekers”). On the other side, Pentecostalism accommodates the frustration of religious and economic outsiders, failing to gain sufficient leeway spaces and material opportunities to meet their expectations. The spiritual and material response to this state of insecurity offered by Pentecostals discloses a logic that is not reducible to the political economy of the developmental state and that inherently challenges the epistemological premises of the secular state.

While the analyses on Pentecostalism and neoliberalism mainly focus on “success stories,” where the ethos promoted by the former allow prospering in the latter, the case here presented suggests the need to nuance and situate the relations between Pentecostalism and economic transformation. Similar studies of Pentecostals as religious, economic, and political outsiders in other African countries – for instance in Cameroun (Sunder 2013) – remind us that the Ethiopian case is not unique. It is one of many situations where the Pentecostal break

with the past does not easily translate into resource accumulation and upward mobility, and it highlights the need for a more critical reassessment of the elective affinity between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism, one that acknowledges the contradictions and shortcomings of this relation.

The Ethiopian case is exemplary of how Pentecostals navigate these contradictions. On the one hand, there seems to be indeed an elective affinity between the Pentecostal ethos and the process of economic transformation promoted by the Ethiopian government through a strategy matching the developmental state with neoliberal policies. The official Government narrative and the material opportunities created by economic transformation encourage a culture of expectation among the population in regard to improved living conditions and economic success. The Pentecostal break with the past resonates with these aspirations, providing them spiritual legitimacy. In a country characterized by a relatively limited experience of market economy, Pentecostalism promotes a shift in values and subjectivities that facilitates the adoption of new behaviours oriented towards entrepreneurship, risk attitude and economic transformation. By matching the adherence to a rigid doctrine and practice of the self with the offer of professional business training, Pentecostal churches allow their members to acquire and enforce a discipline conducive to entrepreneurship. This elective affinity is reinforced by the Pentecostal message on transformation and redemption of the nation. The patriotic vision displayed by Pentecostal leaders and businessmen to work towards a prosperous Ethiopia echoes and contributes to legitimate EPRDF official discourse on economic growth and transformation. Both these narratives convey that “time has come for Ethiopia”.

On the other hand, however, the current economic transformation in Ethiopia does not appear as the result of the “unintended consequences” of the elective affinity between the Pentecostal spirit and the ethos of neoliberalism. Rather it is the result of an explicit strategy of the government to pursue a vast programme of public investments in the name of the developmental state. In contemporary Ethiopia, religious liberalisation has not been matched with a political and economic liberalisation that allows religious entrepreneurs new agency as the state retreats. On the contrary, the neoliberal turn in contemporary EPRDF economic strategy implies a reconfiguration of the state intervention in the economy. The Ethiopian government remains a major player in key economic sectors. In this environment, the radical change promoted by Pentecostals does not automatically or easily translate into upward mobility. This seems particularly true for the “new” Pentecostal groups such as the Unic 7000 Church and its Absolute Value Fellowship, that negotiate their place as outsiders both within the Pentecostal movement and in the broader national public sphere. These groups are animated by a strong desire of upward mobility and success. They are equipped with the theological notions and practical knowledge to prosper in a neoliberal economy. However, they ultimately lack access to the material opportunities

offered by the right political and economic networks. Thus, the Pentecostal business fellowships that are mushrooming in contemporary Ethiopia so far do not represent a challenge to the political and economic establishment. Rather they offer to outsider entrepreneurs limited opportunities to prosper in the niches of free market bestowed by the developmental state.

The tension between Pentecostals' elective affinity with neoliberal economic transformation and the challenges they encounter in prospering under the Ethiopian developmental state is symptomatic of a broader contradiction in the EPRDF approach to economic liberalisation. While officially introducing elements of religious and economic liberalisation, the EPRDF seeks to retain full control of these processes, in order to avoid the emergence of potential political competitors. Thus it fails to fully understand and accommodate the aspirations in terms of freedom and autonomy engendered among the population by these processes of liberalisation, ultimately jeopardising their political legitimacy.

Such risks are evident for instance in the way Pentecostals navigate the uncertainties and frustration in their economic endeavours. They tend to attribute their lack of success to the corruption that still reigns in the political and economic realms. The break with the past preached by Pentecostals as necessary to redeem this corrupted system entails a message that links economic success to individual transformation and spiritual forces. This vision implies a deep epistemological challenge to the separation between the secular and the spiritual, between economy and religion, which lies at the foundation of the Ethiopian secular and developmental state. Thus Pentecostal businesses endeavours should not be reduced to and assessed through the political and economic logic of this world, but rather according to its own spiritual rationale. While the EPRDF has set a temporal horizon of twenty years for the Ethiopian developmental state to achieve its mission of economic transformation, Pentecostals have a longer perspective to redeem the nation, that of God's eternity. In these respects, while the Ethiopian government and Pentecostals seem to agree that "the time has come for Ethiopia", for Pentecostal businesses the times might not have come yet²⁰.

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Crafting Ethiopia's Glorious Destiny. Pentecostalism and Economic Transformation under a Developmental State

The expansion of Pentecostalism and the process of economic growth in contemporary Ethiopia suggest revisiting the supposed "elective affinity" that Pentecostalism shares with neoliberal globalisation and the "spirit of development." While the expansion of Pentecostalism in Africa has been traditionally associated with neoliberalism and a state losing ground, in Ethiopia Pentecostals are prospering in a context marked by the presence of a state that is strongly developmental. Pentecostals hold a controversial relationship with the strategy of this developmental state and their holistic approach challenges the government secular policy.

Key words: Ethiopia, Pentecostalism, developmental state, economic growth, holistic approach.

Du destin glorieux de l'Éthiopie. Pentecôtisme et transformation économique dans un État développementaliste

L'expansion du pentecôtisme et le processus de croissance économique dans l'Éthiopie contemporaine suggèrent de revisiter "l'affinité élective" que le pentecôtisme partagerait avec la mondialisation néolibérale et "l'esprit du développement". Tandis que l'expansion du pentecôtisme en Afrique a été traditionnellement associée au néolibéralisme et au retrait de l'État, en Éthiopie les pentecôtistes prospèrent dans un contexte marqué par la présence d'un État qui favorise fortement le développement. Les pentecôtistes entretiennent une relation controversée avec la stratégie de cet État développementaliste et leur approche holistique défie la politique laïque du gouvernement.

Mots-clés: Éthiopie, pentecôtisme, État développementaliste, croissance économique, approche holistique.

Sobre el destino glorioso de Etiopía. Pentecostalismo y transformación económica en un Estado desarrollista

La expansión del pentecostalismo y el proceso de crecimiento económico en la Etiopía contemporánea sugieren volver sobre la “afinidad electiva” que el pentecostalismo compartiría con la mundialización neoliberal y el “espíritu del desarrollo”. Mientras que la expansión del pentecostalismo en África ha sido tradicionalmente asociada al neoliberalismo y a la retracción del Estado, en Etiopía los pentecostales prosperan en un contexto marcado por la presencia de un Estado que favorece fuertemente el desarrollo. Los pentecostales sostienen una relación controvertida con la estrategia de este Estado desarrollista; el abordaje holístico de los pentecostales desafía la política laica del gobierno.

Palabras clave: Etiopía, pentecostalismo, Estado desarrollista, crecimiento económico, abordaje holístico.