

PROTESTANTISM IN PANAMA

- And why middle classers go Evangelical -

Gerriejan Anna Ravensbergen

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Advisor: Arij Ouweneel

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MAY I INTRODUCE

The Republic of Panama

=

3.2 million inhabitants

3 cities: Panama City, Colón, David

1500 islands

A Constitutional Democracy

Presided by Martín Torrijos

75,517 km²

Size wise equaling Austria or Ireland

Rid of Spain since 1821 and Colombia: 1903

Pretty diligent with 8 % econ growth

Cashing \$8,359 p/p/p/year

Booming in real estate business

Mainly producing services: banking.....

A primary \$-laundering center for narcotics revenue

Managing the Canal better than the U.S ever did

Exporting lots of bananas, shrimp and sugar

Feeding NL with this, export partner # 3

30 % set aside for natural conservation

Hosting 7 Indian tribes

Boasting 92.7% adult literacy

Dry from January till April

Pretty hot (32°) and humid (>100%) otherwise



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Finally, my deepest gratitude to Him, Who moves my world and to Whom I owe everything.

INTRODUCTION

The religious landscape of Latin America has seen some considerable change in the last few decades. At least ten percent of the Latin Americans today call themselves *evangélico*, with substantially higher numbers in Brazil, Chile and Central America. Not only the numbers increase but also the influence Protestants have on the political and social debates. The Brazilian Universal Church for instance founded its own political party in 2005 and pastor Edir Macedo owns one of Brazil's biggest television stations as well as several radio stations, news papers and a soccer team (*Economist*, 23/12/2006: 50). Religious changes in the region have long escaped academic attention because of their image of a marginal variable, destined to wither in the light of new and modern ideologies. This perception however proved wrong, especially in the 'South' in which one has been starting to speak of a 'Protestant explosion' (Burnett and Stoll, 1993: 1-4).¹ While secular ideologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth century faded – from Marxism to Freudianism – the spirit-filled version of Christianity flourished. Pentecostal denominations have prospered and infused in traditional denominations through charismatic initiatives. Once in the margin, these developments now form the world's fastest-growing religious movements (Pew Forum).²

Research question

The question then whether Protestantism is growing in Latin America is no longer subject to discussion. In almost all countries in the region research has concluded in increasing numbers (Burnett, 1998: 117). Instead, the recent debates focus on the long-term implica-

¹ In the last twenty years a group of scholars have been forming theories against the secularization theory including the influential Stark (1999) "Secularization, R.I.P." and Chaves (1994) 'Secularization as declining religious authority'.

² The Pew Forum did a survey in 2006 called *Spirit and Power: a 10-country survey of Pentecostalism* with additionally a very informative comparison of global Pentecostalism.

tions of religious change for household level economics, for emancipation of women or minorities, politics and similar issues. The research subjects of these debates are often the popular classes. This is not surprising since the biggest group within this Pentecostal movement is made up by women from the lower middle class (Dixon, 1995: 479). This makes it easy for researchers in the 'West' to see it as opium of the poor, bringing Marx back into the discussion he was banned from only just before. The Protestant theologian Bastian calls the current Protestant movement 'vehicles for caudillo-style models of religious and social control' (1993: 53). Latin American Pentecostalism, described as oral, unlettered and lively is very different from the nineteenth Protestant movement of the 'written word, of civil and rational education' (ibid.). This very opinion, so common in this field of research, was the starting point of my thesis. Over the last five years I had visited churches in Mexico and Central America that were sometimes like Bastian describes: full of poor people obeying to a dominant charismatic leader. Other times however, I saw dynamic churches with well-educated middle class people, who did not respond to Bastian's picture at all. The latter ones are the churches this study concentrates on because I think they will give some useful nuance in the research on Latin American Pentecostalism. My hypothesis is that their motivation to join evangelical churches is not exactly the same as the motivation of the 'Pentecostal poor' Bastian writes about. Droogers indeed advocates a variety of reasons for explaining Pentecostal growth in Latin America.

One explanation often found in the literature is that Pentecostalism promotes upward social mobility. There are, moreover, churches that seek to attract people from middle and upper classes. It goes without saying that for the success of these different churches in each case different explanations can be given (2006: 53).

In the case of the middle class Evangelicals, few explanations are given so far. In line with Droogers it seems likely that the churches that middle class Panamanians go to, might have specific characteristics that are not shared by all Evangelical churches. And if that is the case I would like to see how this Pentecostal heterogeneity is played out. Lalive d'Épinay's standard work, *El Refugio de las Masas* (1969) makes it sound like the Pentecostal movement is a uniform group. I think this is not the case and would like to

add some nuance to the existing research. To inquire after this in a structured manner I used the following, rather simple research question:

Why do middle class Panamanians go to Evangelical churches?

To answer this question I will look into the history of Panama, how Protestantism arrived and what other faiths are represented in the religious field. The current religious field will be sketched: the patchwork of churches and organizations, including Catholic, that operate individually in the ‘religious market’ in Panama. Different theories on religious change will be discussed and compared to how pastors look at this issue. I will touch upon the doctrines these churches hold and how they bring this into practice. Finally, and most importantly, I will analyze why people themselves say they joined an Evangelical church, what they were looking for, if anything, and what they found that made them stay.

Relevance

For sheer academical relevance this work will make a region-specific addition to the body of literature on Evangelical churches in Latin America. Although literature on the religious developments of the last few decades is widely available, very little has been published on Panama.³ Another underemphasized topic is that of middle class people and Evangelical churches. Only in Guatemala this group has been subject of research, but always in relationship to Neo-Pentecostal churches (vid. e.g. Canton Delgado, 1998 and Gooren, 2002).⁴ The social relevance of this work is to understand important phenomena in Latin American popular culture and their impact. The authors reviewed in the next chapter all note that religious identity remains one of the most vital Latin American cultural landmarks. Examination of such issues as how and why individuals convert, to what religious groups, why to these and not to others, and what religious group membership means in daily live gives us a better cultural understanding. Even though most churches

³ The few that exist are Vital Moreno, “El Protestantismo en Panama” in Via Antigua, 1983. Clifton Holland, “Status of Christianity country profile”, 1981, revised 2002.

⁴ Additionally, Guatemala is a very specific case due to its history of civil violence and Mayan influences.

shun from political organizing, they *do* have a large influence on the private sphere which eventually might have just as large a public impact.

Definition of terms

Protestant, Evangelical, (Neo-) Pentecostal, charismatic

Reading academic literature on Christianity in Latin America one easily gets confused by the seemingly unsystematic use of the terms Protestant, Evangelical, Pentecostal, Neo-Pentecostal, charismatic etc. In reality most Latin American Protestants call themselves *evangélico*. This term can refer to anything non-Roman Catholic and sometimes even includes Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, whom most U.S. Evangelicals regard as sects.⁵ The confusion that comes from the large variety of branches is further complicated by the vocabulary that comes from the U.S. but received a different meaning in its new Latin American home. Nevertheless, there are certain beliefs that define the Protestant Evangelical tradition worldwide (Stoll, 1990: 3):

1. The complete reliability and final authority of the Bible.
2. The need to be saved through a personal relation with Jesus Christ, often expressed in terms of being 'born again'.
3. The importance of spreading the message of salvation to every nation and person, a duty often referred to as the 'Great Commission'.

Although the term *evangélico* in Latin America encompasses a broad variety of movements, the reality is that the far majority of the Protestants are Pentecostal. They subscribe the three points mentioned above but put a significant emphasis on the Holy Spirit and His gifts like healing and speaking in tongues. 'All the various expressions of Pentecostalism have one common experience, which is a personal encounter with the Spirit of God enabling and empowering people for service. Pentecostals often declare that 'signs and wonders' accompany this encounter, certain evidence of 'God with us' (Anderson, 2004: 187).

⁵ These groups can be distinguished by the fact that they use a different source of revelation than the Bible.

In this study I will use the different terms simultaneously. The context point out the difference between ‘historical’ Protestant churches, or ‘new’ Protestant i.e. Evangelical churches. The word ‘Pentecostal’ I will use in the theoretical chapters for its grammatical versatility, but it is important to note that my respondents in Panama did not use this term to describe themselves nor their church.⁶

Middle class

Social hierarchies and their definitions vary greatly. Different factors can define the middle class of a society, such as money, behavior, and heredity. In some countries it is predominantly money that determines an individual’s position in the social hierarchy. In others, including many Latin American countries, social factors have a strong influence. These factors comprise education, professional or employment status, home ownership and culture. In this study I kept to the classification of social strata made by Skidmore and Smith (460: 2005). They constructed an analytical scheme for Latin America along two separate dimensions: urban-rural position and class status. In this view there are six groups: urban and rural upper class, urban and rural middle class and urban and rural lower class. The groupings in the lower class, often known as the ‘popular classes’ in Latin America, are people that are undereducated, sometimes malnourished, and systematically deprived of the benefits of development. Many of them participate in the rapidly growing informal sector, working at odd jobs outside the formal economy. The middle class is a heterogeneous stratum including professionals, teachers, merchants, intellectuals and small farmers in the countryside (op. cit.: 461).

Although using Skidmore and Smith’s scheme as baseline, the boundaries among the elite, the middle class and the lower class in Panama are not well defined nor imperious. Nor are the distinctions between rural and urban inhabitants absolute. City and countryside are linked in numerous ways and migration back and forth is frequent. Social mobility is considerable according to the American Congress country studies and mainly affected by wealth, occupation, education, and family affiliation. In economical studies the middle class is usually defined by their income. For this study the social factors de-

⁶ For a detailed explanation of the differences between Pentecostal, charismatic, evangelical and Protestant see *Operation World* of P. Johnstone and J. Mandryk (2001).

termining social hierarchy weighed heaviest although one can assume a middle class income to start roughly at 1000 dollars a month.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is made up of an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion. In the first chapter I will shape the theoretical framework in which the argument is developed. Three categories of Pentecostal growth in Latin America are formed, discussing the most influential theories and authors of this field of research. In the second chapter the fieldwork is discussed. This chapter accounts for the core of this thesis: the interviews with the pastors and members of the churches Crossroads International Bible Church and Grupo Cristiano Calle Belén. The purpose of these interviews is to get a closer look at how churches function and why people start attending an Evangelical church. To give account for the eventual conclusions I discuss in this second chapter my motivation for the topic, position and biases as a researcher and the used methods. The third chapter contains an exploration of the religious field of Panama. Although the country is religiously pluralistic, an emphasis will be put on Catholic, Liberal, and Protestant history as the most important contributors. In the fourth chapter I will introduce the churches I did fieldwork in. Their history and daily routine will be discussed and how they appeal to a middle class, well-educated audience. In the final chapter the main research question will be answered, discussing the motivations of people going to an Evangelical church and how this fits in with the different theories on Pentecostal growth in the region.

To keep the text clear and readable, I have put secondary information in footnotes. Their function is to clarify the text and account for the direct quotes. To not overwhelm the reader with footnotes in the last chapter I have added a figure in which all respondents are introduced with a few personal details. I thought it was important to use direct quoting to give at least an idea of the original interviews and exact wording of people. All quotes are given in their original language, which is mostly in Spanish and sometimes in English. Additionally, where I believed the Spanish terms would cover the contents better than the English equivalent, I used the Spanish word put in *italics*. To prevent repetition I shortened the Roman Catholic Church to Catholic Church, even though

within the Roman Catholic tradition that actually refers to the entire Christian Community, including Protestants. Equally, Crossroads International Bible Church is shortened to Crossroads and Grupo Cristiano Calle Belén to Calle Belén.

- Chapter one -

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“The growth of Pentecostalism in Latin America has been one of the most remarkable stories in the history of Christianity.”

(Anderson, 2004: 63)

The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the most important theories explaining Protestant growth in Latin America. In 1992 Virginia Burnett, historian, reviewed nine influential books on Protestantism in the region and concluded that ‘a paradigm or theory has yet to emerge to explain the allure of Protestantism in Latin America’ (1992: 230). Now, fifteen years later, this is still the case. According to the anthropologist Droogers the conflict between different explanatory models should not be regarded a problem. Differing models in religious research do not necessarily exclude each other, but can be complementary. Their purpose is to open up the large reserve of possible causal relations and draw attention to the most diverse characteristics and relationships within the discourse (2006: 47). Trying to find a comprehensive way to bring together the arguments of different authors, I followed the classification of the sociologist Bomann using the categories of structural change, social need and spiritual fulfillment (1999: 36). This classification is not flawless, but a sufficiently satisfying way to compare and relate the variety of theories.

Explanation #1: Structural change

Since the middle of the twentieth century Latin America experienced a period of rapid industrialization and modernization. To survive these developments people moved *en masse* to the cities making Latin America the most urbanized continent in the developing world (Price, 2001: 26). In these cities the familiar system of norms and values were not

able to keep pace with the rapid developments. Rural norms were no longer valid, but neither had new norms been able to form yet. Studies focusing on this phenomenon point to the positive functional relationship between these socio-cultural developments and Pentecostal church growth. Most important advocates of this 'anomie' theory are Emilio Willems and Christian Lalive d'Epina. Anomie is a situation in which absence of norms is the cause of uncertainty about appropriate behavior. Willems examined Protestantism in Chile and Brazil in the early 1960s. His book, *Followers of the New Faith* (1967), was unique in relating Pentecostalism with dislocation and modernity. He hypothesized that the forces of modernization had weakened traditional values, making room for people to organize themselves again and create a new set of values. Pentecostalism functioned a successful medium because it is farthest removed from the established Catholic social structure that people wanted to get away from. After migrating to the city they organized themselves independently in Evangelical churches and therewith showed that paternalistic relationships had lost their meaning. The equality of believers denies feudal and class society and creates a new urban, egalitarian social structure.

Only two years after Willems, Lalive used this same structural theory to explain Protestant growth in Chili which resulted in his book *Haven of the Masses* (1969). He equally claims that lower classes, being uprooted from the security of family and village ties seek new communities in the city. The close-knit, supportive family-like style of Pentecostal churches recreates for migrants a community of social and material exchange. They find a new home, including *hermanos* and *hermanas*, who replace the family that stayed behind in the country side. Even though they are a nobody in the city, they can gain prestige within the church by fulfilling certain tasks and consequently climb up in the religious hierarchy. In contrast to Willems, Lalive does not see the failure of the rural feudal structure expressed in Pentecostal churches but rather a continuation. In the new urban setting the role of the landowner is taken over by the pastor ruling his Pentecostal 'hacienda'. Lalive regards Pentecostalism as a conservative development that continues to support the political and economical status quo, whereas Willems sees Pentecostalism as a progressive and modernizing movement with democratic tendencies.

In the late 1980s Sheldon Annis empirically tested some of the key hypotheses of Lalive and Willems in the setting of rural Guatemala. He asked himself the question what

it was about Protestantism that had led to massive religious conversion throughout the Guatemalan Highlands. He finds an answer in the material advantages people find in Protestantism to combat socio-economic change. Through careful analysis of household incomes, expenses, landownership and business practices in the community, he finds Protestants in his village earning and saving more money than their Catholic counterparts. They no longer pay what he calls a 'Catholic cultural tax' (1987: 90). This means they do not partake anymore in income-leveling *cofradías*, nor do they channel their savings into the communal *milpa* technology.⁷ Annis claims that religious change undermines traditional values, which is exactly the attraction of Protestant and in particular Pentecostal churches (ibid.). Where Willems and Lalive focused on the aspect of dislocation in the global process of modernization, Annis stresses the influence of capitalism as a changing force. Both conclude that Protestant growth is used as a survival strategy in a rapidly changing world.

The structural argument ascribes Pentecostal growth to recent large-scale changes in the region: economic reforms, political instability and societal transformations. These changes impact millions of people who lose their sense of identity and stability (Bomann, 1999: 37). However these developments can only be applied to certain forms of Pentecostalism and to specific categories of believers. The explanation that the model offers is therefore partial. It can for instance not explain situations in which anomie is not present. And one can ask if cities are really lacking that much order. Don't neighborhoods actually start to function as little villages after a while? Annis' argument only holds when Protestantism is compared to popular Catholics, to which many costly traditions are attached. Amy Sherman challenges his conclusions with research among a thousand households in Guatemala City. She concludes that orthodox Catholics (as opposed to popular Catholics) tend to be just as, or even better, economically well off as their Protestant counterparts (1997). The structural explanation focuses on factors that are external to religion: people look for norms and find them in a Protestant church. It does not say anything about the faith itself. Why do people choose religion to solve anomie and why within the pool of religions, Pentecostalism?

⁷ An indigenous production system that generated a relatively fixed output that was pegged to consumption rather than to the largest possible yield. An inwardly turned mechanism which has its history in external exploitation.

Explanation #2: Social need

In the last fifty years Latin American countries have undergone significant transformations with economic policy moving from closed, state-dominated economies to a market oriented model. Policymakers expected these changes to speed up economic growth and increase productivity while at the same time leading to the creation of more jobs and income equity. The results showed only partly satisfying. Investments and economic growth increased, but at the same time employment rates and fair income distribution deteriorated (Stallings and Peres, 2000: 1-4). Pentecostal churches draw the marginalized poor in by offering practical services that helps them cope with the daily hardships resulting from neo-capitalist changes (Bomann, 1999: 38). The lack of government assistance in the struggle of many people in Latin America leaves them looking for an institution that is able to fill the gap. Pentecostal churches have been able to do this skillfully: they give attention to the sick through divine healing, provide food baskets, labor pools, job networks, emergency funds and exchange of goods. Members of the lower classes are regularly faced with pressing needs in which the church is a valuable resource network. Apart from providing them with material support, they also receive emotional support and encouragement from their church family (op. cit.: 38-39).

A good example of this explanatory model is the study of Mariz. In her publication *Coping with Poverty* (1994) she compared Pentecostal churches, Catholic base communities and Afro-Brazilian spiritism focusing on how people from these different groups deal with poverty. According to Mariz, Pentecostalism appeals to the weakest people because it provides psycho-social and cultural means to avoid the mentally damaging consequences of extreme poverty. So instead of finding refuge in alcoholism, family violence and crime, they obtain mental support in church. Large upward mobility is not reached, but marginal improvement *is* perceived due to a sense of hope, purpose and a doctrine that stresses ascetic behavior (op. cit.: 97-111). It has left many people wondering why Pentecostals voluntarily accept restricting rules from a church. Mariz explains this by looking at the concept of freedom which is not so much understood in terms of 'doing whatever you want' but rather in being free from 'doing what you do not want':

(...) I hope to demonstrate that by offering “deliverance of evil” Pentecostalism enables the believer to perceive him or herself as an individual, with a certain degree of autonomy and freedom of choice, and to reject any self-conception that restricts individuals to traditionally prescribed roles and denies them the capacity to choose their own destiny (op. cit.: 205).⁸

Added to this freedom of evil, Pentecostalism legitimizes practical behaviors that improve living situations (op. cit.: 125). This argument is very much alike the one of Annis: Pentecostalism makes it possible to lead a ‘lower-cost lifestyle’. In Annis case it means being excused from costly popular Catholic traditions. In Mariz’ example it means having a good argument for leading an ascetic lifestyle free from alcohol and violence. Like Mariz, the anthropologist Brusco (1995) concludes that the emphasis on family life and ascetic conduct curbs *machismo* behavior of drinking, violence and poor budgeting.⁹ She asserts that many family problems stem from the typical Latino male getting prestige from his life on the ‘street’: alcohol, violence, promiscuity. A large percentage of the income is spent on going to bars and maintaining the ‘casa chica’. But when a man adopts the ascetic lifestyle promoted by Pentecostal churches the costs inherent to his old lifestyle will dramatically decrease. No longer is prestige build on the affairs of the ‘street’ but on how well his household does.

Tapping into the gender issue the political scientist Hallum goes even as far as to call Pentecostalism a women movement (2003: 182). Women collectively support each other in opposing the status quo of religious hegemony by Catholics, but also poverty and *machismo*. Pentecostalism addresses all kinds of issues in the home, making it attractive for women. Although they are often unable to hold leadership titles, Hallum argues that women in Pentecostal churches are still more empowered in Pentecostal than women in the Catholic Church where she sees them excluded all together (op. cit.: 184). This is questionable though, since Drogus concludes in her research (1997) that like in Pentecos-

⁸ This idea of freedom is mentioned throughout the Bible and well explained by the Apostel Paul in Romans 7:23-25 ‘But I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!’ (New English Version).

⁹ The rather arbitrary term *Machismo* signifies here the complex of male behaviors such as excessive drinking, violence against women, chronic infidelity, abdication of household duties, and a general identification with the street culture rather than with the home.

tal organization, women in Catholic base communities are also the main constituent. Both Drogus and Hallum agree however on the point that to understand a movement in which the majority is made up by women, these specific women-related issues are very relevant to take up in the analyses. Since it is the women that are in many situations the basis of the household, usually social needs are felt and responded to by them. Still this argument also brings up its questions, like why do people in difficult situations hang on to a religion that is highly time and money consuming? And why do people stay committed long after their initial crisis or need has passed?

Explanation #3: Spiritual fulfillment

This third explanation for Pentecostal growth in Latin America takes as a preposition that as human beings we want to give meaning to our lives. According to Berger this existential need and religion are very closely related: “The religious enterprise of human history profoundly reveals the pressing urgency and intensity of man’s quest for meaning” (1967: 100). However, this does not answer the question why it is religion that fulfills this spiritual need. In the next section I would like to introduce two theories that give a vision on why Evangelical churches emerged to satisfy this need of spirituality in Latin America in the last few decades. These two theories almost seem like each others opposites, arguing for a foreign invasion on the one hand and an indigenous inculturation on the other.

The foreign invasion of Pentecostalism

El misionero protestante, al arrancar la fe del corazón del católico, le arranca también el amor a su Patria y le pone en contacto con las costumbres y con el idioma de un país extraño a nuestra lengua, a nuestra raza, a nuestra historia y a nuestras tradiciones (German, 1943).

To put this quote from the *Breve Catecismo Antiprottestante* in the right context one has to realize that for centuries the Catholic Church had the official monopoly in Latin American on satisfying people’s spiritual needs. In the last decades of the nineteenth century this started to change however and liberal leaders in Central America allowed missionaries to come and evangelize. For both parties this was a good deal with mutual gain: increased political stability, economic development and a cultural evolution resembling

that of the U.S. (Burnett, 1992: 220). This invitation was the start of a religious ‘free market’ in which people could now choose from a variety of meaning-givers who marketed their ‘product’. That resulted in a persisted growth-theory in which the U.S. influence was given center stage. Dominating the region they supposedly implemented their faith to facilitate their political, economical and military agendas.

Protestantism was seen as another tool to dominate Latin America. This is not surprising since indeed many foreign missionaries were U.S. citizens that came to plant churches and start up development projects. These early missionaries explicitly stated that their vision was to encourage a new liberal order and to convert Catholics to their own brand of Christianity (Bonino, 1985: 25). As a result, much of the scholarship examines Protestantism in Latin America as an external phenomenon, imposed from outside by a dominant nation. Diamond and Assmann represent some excellent research in this school. Assmann’s work (1987) is concerned with the impact of U.S. televangelists in Brazil. He argues that Brazilians converting to Protestantism also emulate the cultural norms and secular values preached by the same programs. Diamond (1989) writes from a Marxist perspective and is concerned about the growing influence of the U.S. Christian Right in Latin America. Although both works focus on the consequences instead of the causes of Protestant growth, their studies imply the big U.S. influence on the religious developments.

Brouwer, Gifford and Rose also support the idea that the expansion of Protestantism has more to do with American politics than Christian beliefs. Their subject is the new Christian fundamentalists who adhere to the formulas of what is referred to as ‘prosperity gospel’ or ‘health-and-wealth’ theology, often practiced in so called Neo-Pentecostal churches. Much alike the social need explanation their central thesis is that this theology is a U.S. innovation drawing people from middle and upper class for its promise of prosperity (1996). It is interesting that Willems and Lalive never made any claims of Pentecostalism being a foreign invasion. On the contrary: they saw Pentecostalism really as a homegrown faith born from local initiatives. Anderson confirms this idea, even calling Pentecostalism more Latin American than Catholicism (2004: 63). He bases this on the fact that Pentecostal churches in Latin America are usually founded and run by the local population. Compared to foreign missionaries active in Pentecostal churches in the region

there is very high numbers of foreign priests active in Latin America (even as high as 94 percent in Venezuela) (ibid.). Burnett equally denies the American influence on local Protestantism. Her research in Guatemala shows that the missionaries working there have indeed never been able to detach culture from spirituality and with the gospel they inevitably promoted cultural change. However, the moral codes they favored were only seen as a consequence of conversion, not as its central purpose. According to Burnett, U.S. missionaries did not consider themselves political emissaries, but rather agents of Jesus Christ in modern disguise (1998: xi).

Reinventing indigenous spirituality

Another way to understand how Pentecostalism could feed the need for ‘man’s quest for meaning’, is to look at it as a reinvention of traditional believes systems. As early as the 1960s, Willems saw the movement as a continuation of popular Catholicism and Brazilian millenarianism (Droogers, 2006: 55). He was followed by many academics claiming Pentecostalism to be specifically appealing for indigenous groups. For this segment of the population it is both a way back to their roots while simultaneously integrating them in the ‘modern’ world (vid. e.g. Martin, 1990; Bastian, 1993; Dow and Sandstrom, 2001). The emphasis on faith-healing and speaking in tongues would offer continuity with old believe systems that are autochthonous to many Latin American indigenous groups.

A good example of this line of thought is a contribution of Garma in *Holy Saints and Fiery Preachers* (2001). Her research covered several provinces in Mexico and concluded that even though Catholicism is still the dominating religion, Pentecostalism significantly increased the last twenty years especially under the indigenous population. She claims that Indians have an easy understanding of healing by the Holy Spirit because of their traditions of invoking godly elements and entities. They are willing to accept healing by the Holy Spirit as the only right way to salvation even if they have to give up their old ways. An important drawing factor in this decision is that pastors and preachers usually come from the local population and services are held in their original language (op. cit.: 57-72).

Another interesting analysis of a situation in which Pentecostalism is very easy to accept for an indigenous community is from Hans Siebers. He compared Guatemalan In-

dian religion to Catholicism and Evangelicalism. His argument is that the downfall of liberationist theology and the surge in Evangelical movements among Indians reflect the similarity of practices between the latter, and the gap between Indian and liberationist practices. The Catholic Church wanted to work with the poor, not the Indians. And they did not understand that in times of trouble Indians tend to go to the gods for direct vertical counsel and do not resolve matters through horizontal discourse and conflict with other people. Equally Pentecostalism restores the value of personal contact with the supernatural world and is therefore easily accepted by Indians (Dixon, 1995: 484). The argument that Pentecostalism taps into the indigenous source of traditional religion of course only applies to countries in Latin America with a large indigenous constituency:

There is an interaction between Catholicism, Protestantism, and traditional Indian belief systems. In Latin American communities with no Indian population, the role of the institutional churches is very different. (...) This is why conclusions about religious change in countries where Indian populations are not significant, such as Brazil and Chile, should only be extended to Mexico or Central America with the greatest caution (Garma, 2001: 68).

This remark of Garma supports Droogers argument that different explanatory schemes can exist next to one another. Without really contradicting each other they can explain the same phenomenon in different times, places and situations (2006: 47).

The Catholic Church and the invasion of the sects

In this chapter different reasons for religious change were brought up regarding Pentecostalism as the answer for structural, social or spiritual needs. But one can wonder: what about the Catholic Church? The first response to this is: they are the answer to many people's needs in Latin America. And that is why not the entire region is Pentecostal. But, as Chesnut puts it, they are not longer the sole player in the 'religious market' (2003). With opting for the poor in Medellín in 1969 Liberation theology got solid ground in Latin America.¹⁰ This ideology, together with the base communities captured the imagination of catholic scholars worldwide. Many assumed that a transformative and prophetic church would attract the poor and cause them to appreciate Catholicism's relevance like

¹⁰ This is part of the earlier mentioned 'Liberation Theology', a school within the Catholic Church that depicts Jesus not only as liberator of sin but also a deliverer of earthly oppression. It emphasizes the Christian mission to bring justice to the poor and oppressed particularly by means of political activism.

never before. But surprisingly enough the Pentecostal churches exploded at the very moment that Catholic hierarchies inspired liberation theology (Gambino, 2001: 196).

There has been much discussion about why this promising movement gave less result than expected. According to Stoll the answer is simple: although designed to support the poor, it worked out negatively for them and they therefore did not stick with it. Liberationists thought that saving souls made little sense if the social order ruining so many lives did not get changed. However, most people did not go to church for politics, but for spirituality and so the political engagement only worked alienating (1990: 309). One of the keys to understanding Pentecostal attraction in Latin America, is understanding the difference between the engaged liberationist Catholics and the conservative, politically rather passive Pentecostals. For Latin America's poor, supporting liberation theology meant leaving the traditional function of religion. Unwilling to accept this change, they sought refuge in the Protestant alternative (op. cit.: 313).

Additionally, the Catholic Church has to contend with a great lack of clergy. In the West this has been reaching problematic proportions leaving in the U.S. for instance 3,000 parishes without priest. But also in countries such as Honduras and Mexico, long Catholic strongholds, vacancies are numerous leaving respectively one priest for every 13,250 parishioners and one priest per 7,300 parishioners. This is contrasted by one pastor for every 230 church members in Latin America's Evangelical churches (*Newsweek*, 18/4/2005: 24, *Latin Trade*, 7/2005: 6). As the Catholic Church has been struggling internally through social, political and hierarchical issues Pentecostal churches were holding ardent evangelistic campaigns and healing revivals, planting churches in the remotest corners. Understandingly, the Pentecostal zeal has been threatening for the Roman Catholic Church, with Pope John Paul II warning against the 'invasion of the sects' and the 'ravenous wolves' (Anderson, 2004: 63).

Discussion

In this chapter we have looked at structural, social and spiritual reasons for people to be drawn to the Pentecostal church. All are valid explanations that have been supported by solid fieldwork and data analysis. Every one of them shows a little facet of the changing religious landscape in Latin America. The purpose of setting out this framework is not to

construct the one right grant theory but to explore the different elements and relations between various ideas. This opens up the discussion to possible causal relationships and widens the scope of one's observations. "Understood in this manner, the contradictions (...) enrich the heuristic instrumentation at one's disposal and draw attention to the most diverse characteristics and relationships." (Droogers, 2006: 50). Despite the large amount of explanations, the existing literature lacks a few elements to explain the full phenomenon. First, social scientist have mainly focused on the structural reasons for conversion staying very far from the daily practice of how believers experience their faith and what it does in their lives. It is the question if a believer in Brazil really thinks his conversion comes from a desire to belong to a larger community or to find an authoritarian figure in his urban life. Or that a farmer in the Guatemalan highlands really 'accepted Jesus' because he thought it would bring him material gain. Although this is exactly what Sheldon Annis concludes after his fieldwork in Guatemala, he does not leave out to mention the explanation the respondents themselves gave:

... that Jesus loves them personally and that they have come to love Jesus personally in a way unlike they experienced in Catholicism.(...) In the end, the growth of Protestantism among the highland Indians of Guatemala is a matter of faith and the satisfaction people derive from believing in God (1994: xvii).

One can wonder until what degree you can reduce such an experience to academic explanatory models. Are believers really taken serious if their own explanations are put aside? Bomann claims that we can only depict the strength of a faith in people's lives if it is examined from within, through the believer's perspective. Additionally, all explanations examined in this chapter are derived from research among the poor segments of society. Usually the lower-class position of Pentecostal believers is referred to as a general characteristic. This automatically leads to a specific type of explanations. It would be interesting to include in research both churches that address the poorest people and the churches that have a middle-class constituency. It seems very likely that for the success of these different churches in each case different explanations can be given.

Lastly, almost all countries in Latin America have seen studies on their Pentecostal history, constituency, growth and implications. Lest for Panama. Since this country is relatively small and not an extraordinary case for the field of religious studies, there is

hardly anything published on this topic in or outside the country. This lack of research combined with the presence of a substantial middle class made it an interesting place for me to conduct fieldwork. In response to the need of deeper insight into these three issues, the study at hand seeks to present a better view on Pentecostalism in Panama, examining the motivation of middle class Panamanians to join and commit to an evangelical church.

The *plan de marché* is to examine till what extend the theories of this chapter can be applied on my research group. In the interviews with respondents I will look for structural arguments: comments on anomie, dislocation, a need for more guidelines in life. And in the same way for social need arguments: are they attracted by what the church offers to help them with economical and psychological problems? I will analyse till what degree the spiritual argument is relevant: do people end up at an Evangelical church because they are looking for a meaning-giver? If so, what had they exactly been looking for and what did they find that made them stay? With all these questions the stories of the respondents will be central. Although objectivity in this research is an impossible mission I have tried to not look for *my* answers in their narratives but have them speak for their own.

- Chapter two -

THE FIELDWORK

“Value premises do enter into our arguments. So they should not be hidden, as tacit assumptions, but implicitly stated.”

(Sundkler, 1961: 16)

In this chapter I want to discuss the method I used for gathering data in my fieldwork and the processing of this data in the writing stage. I will explain how I chose the place, the churches and the people I interviewed. Following Sundkler’s advice I will also discuss the position I had as a researcher and the biases that might have come with me being from a certain place and having a certain background. But before anything else I will give a short explanation of how I embarked upon making Evangelical churches the theme of this study.

Motivation

Before I even knew there was a discourse taking place in the academical world about Pentecostalism in Latin America I had yet rather accidentally been introduced to the phenomenon. Sitting for my exams as a senior in high school I could not wait to get out and travel the world. Being from a Dutch Christian family it was quite self-evident to go work for a Christian organization somewhere and I ended up working with YWAM in Oaxaca, Mexico for eight months.¹¹ When I moved to the capital of the state to take Spanish classes for some time I stayed with a young Christian family. Apart from offering me the bed of their oldest daughter, they gave me an amazing experience of the Mexican culture, making me part of their family, friends and church. The time to follow I would go to

¹¹ YWAM stands for Youth With a Mission, a worldwide interdenominational organization focused on development work and evangelization.

church with them three times a week and hang out with the youth group any time I did not have class. In these days I was introduced to a new world. I learned that as a Mexican Christian you are not supposed to drink alcohol, go to clubs or date with a boy without your pastor's permission. I became to know their music, literature and Christian jargon. I also witnessed their great efforts to share the Good News with *hermanos* and *hermanas* in the far and impassable mountains of Oaxaca and tell them how Jesus had changed their lives. They shared their dreams, hopes and fears with me and offered a friendship that lasts till today. When my sister and I took a trip to Guatemala and Honduras later that year, we had an experience alike the one in Oaxaca. We noticed that the easiest way to get a taste of local life was to walk into any random church and attend the service. As *hermanas en Cristo* people would approach us with great confidence and openness, giving us a glimpse of their daily life and Christian practice.

Back in the Netherlands, it was surprising again to see how this whole travel experience was imbedded in an academic discourse of Pentecostal growth in Latin America. With great interest I read the explanations and impact of Pentecostalism in Latin America and compared them to my own experience. Sometimes they were very elucidating, other times I could not match anything of the theory with what I had seen and experienced. It was especially the interface of theory and daily practice that interested me. I never heard any Mexican Evangelical telling me they gave their time, money and efforts to a faith because of material gain, modernity or dislocation (respectively Annis, Willems and Lalive). The dialectical interaction coming from this relation interested me such that I decided to write my Bachelor thesis on Pentecostal growth, a work very much alike the first chapter of this thesis. And because I thought my knowledge built up so far would lead to an interesting fieldwork in Panama I continued with the topic for my Master thesis. To say therefore that this work started in Panama, summer of 2007 would not be exactly right. Even though the data are gathered in this period, the journey in reality started years back.

Methods in the field

The fieldwork took place between May 22 and September 10, 2007 in Panama City, Panama. I had chosen this place for two reasons. First, I wanted to pick a place where I

could do research on middle class Evangelicals. Panama has a relative large middle class and I knew at least one church I was interested in. Second were personal reasons: I had friends living in the city.

I lived at two different locations in the city: first a few weeks with the family of my boyfriend in Obarrio, a neighborhood located in the banking area. They are active Catholics who got me started in many areas and with whom I joined to Catholic mass every other week. Next, I lived for three months in Bella Vista a centrally located historical neighborhood, sharing an apartment with another girl. Living alone as a girl of my age is not common in Panama, although accepted, especially for foreigners. Both places were located in relatively nice areas in the city. This meant it was safe and central. It also meant that the people I got in touch with on daily basis were often from a specific group in society. Generally I found people were quite private and it took a larger effort than expect to integrate: people work all day, move around in cars and meet by appointment. I encountered them as very friendly but more urban and individualistic than I was used to in Central America.

It took me a few weeks to identify the churches that would be interesting for research. I attended several different services and talked with people about churches they knew. Initially, I focused on Crossroads and Casa de Oración, where I assisted the services the first few weeks. After almost a month, two respondents of Casa de Oración introduced me to another church they thought would be more interesting for my research. This was indeed the case. Calle Belén had a higher concentration of middle class attendees than Casa de Oración and so I decided to continue further research in Calle Belén. This move made me lose time but was a good decision. The next step then was to introduce myself to the pastor, have an interview with him about general issues as church history, church growth and cooperation with other churches. I presented myself exactly as I was: a student doing research to Evangelical churches in Panama. The pastors did not seem to feel intimidated or threatened by that. On the contrary: they were interested and helped me out a great deal by introducing me to respondents.

The churches I eventually picked had 300 and 700 members. This is not small but there are several bigger churches.¹² At Crossroads Bible Church I asked the pastor who he thought I could interview for my research. He asked the parameters I had in mind and provided me with telephone numbers or personally presented me to people. Once I interviewed somebody I would ask the person if he knew other people I could interview. This ‘snowball effect’ had the advantage that I managed to get the wanted number of respondents with the right profile fairly quick, which otherwise could have been difficult. The possible disadvantage of this method is that people might have brought me in contact with people they thought were interesting for my research, limiting the diversity of respondents. Another disadvantage was that I did not always know the people I interviewed well. Although I was befriended with some people because we were for instance in a small group together, there were others I met for the first time with the interview. This might have constraint their confidence with me and made it harder for me to put their story in the right perspective. In Calle Belén I joined the services and a women Bible group. After a while I asked people I had befriended there for an interview.

With all 15 respondents I introduced myself the same way as I did with the pastors. I explained my research in general terms, the purpose of the interview and what I would like to talk about with them. Usually people were extremely nice about it and took great effort to put me in their busy schedules. The places of interviews were wherever that person felt comfortable, usually their house, the church or a coffee house. Because I wanted to tape the interviews I always tried to find a relatively quiet surrounding. The fifteen interviews I conducted went very well. People told me their stories with enthusiasm and were very open about their personal life. They did not seem to be bothered by the mp3 player and were never opposed to me taping the conversation. I had the impression people would forget about the taping after a while, like I did. In journalism it is assumed that taking notes is less disturbing then taping, but this was not my experience. I would take notes to support the taping and as a back up for data loss but this actually seemed more disturbing then putting my recorder on the table. At home I would try to work out the interview right away, making the transcription easier with the conversation

¹² The biggest in the city are Hosanna with 5000 members. But it would have been harder to interview people there because of the difficulty to get to know people in such a large crowd. .

fresh in my head. Besides interviewing people from churches I also got in contact with several academics that shared my interest in the topic. A professor from the Catholic University Maria la Antigua (USMA) adopted me as his student, spending many hours discussing both Catholic and Protestant developments in Panama. He also brought me into contact with other professors I then interviewed. Sharing insights from their specialized point of view with me, my knowledge received a broader and more academic foundation.¹³

Another method I used to support research and gather data was participant observation. This meant I attended church services (Friday and Sunday), a Bible study (Tuesday), a women meeting (Wednesday), a student group (Thursday) and a small group (Thursday) on weekly basis. In these meetings I would do what everybody did: stand up when they stood up, sing, give my offering (ok, not my tithe), and greet everybody as it was normal to do. I felt easily at home in the different meetings that were very much alike what I had seen elsewhere in Central America and the Netherlands. Since people would bring their Bible and make notes, I did the same and made both notes of the sermon and of things that struck me during the meetings. I had never used this method before and with reading other people's research afterwards I understand that I could have looked at details much closer and worked things out much more careful. I might have missed out on this a little. Another caveat might be that I did not interview Catholic people about their faith experience. It would have added more depth to this study to compare the interviews with evangelical respondents to conversations with Catholic respondents about their reasons to stay or even come back and what place faith has in their live. I left this out for lack of time. And now the writing process commenced I also see the worth of it better than I did during my fieldwork.

After the service people would usually linger on and hang out talking. I liked these moments to get to know people better, talk about their and my daily matters but it was also a good time to network. Primary written sources I gathered 'on the street' or maybe better said in the churches in the form of announcements, leaflets and web sites.¹⁴

¹³ Special thanks to Fransisco Blanco, Vital Moreno and Jorge Kam Ríos from the USMA and Maria-Helena Porras from the Universidad Nacional.

¹⁴ Both churches have their own web site with a short history, organizational structure, announcements and sermons. www.crossroadspanama.com and www.grupocallebelen.com.

If hand-outs were given with announcements and a bible study schedule I would take them home. Since the church or church-related meetings were usually in the evenings or weekends I found myself with ample time during the day to look for secondary sources. The university libraries of the Universidad Nacional and the USMA were very helpful for local publications on religion in Panama. The National Library in the Parque Omar is another resourceful place. Every Panamanian who writes something is obliged to leave a few copies in the National Library in Parque Omar, which resulted in a great collection on Panamanian literature and history. A whole set of data on the number of Protestants and affiliations I took from the Contraloría Nacional that turned out to be located only two blocks away from my apartment and whose personnel kindly helped me to consult a dozen of books and use their currently remodeled library.

Biases as a researcher

Although Panama is a mixing bowl of different races, colors, ethnicities and languages, people would usually recognize me as a foreigner. I was just a little too tall and too white to fit the average picture. Usually people would ask me if I were a *gringa*, a U.S. citizen. I had the impression my Dutch nationality was usually positively received. People actually surprised me with their geographical knowledge. I one day met a taxi driver that imported seeds directly from Holland to sow on the land he still owned in his hometown. And another time a girl in church would tell me she freelanced for the UN under a Dutch manager. So I did not come from another planet. Especially not for the people I interviewed, who had all traveled outside of Panama. Crossroads was a very international church with people from all over the world and my presence there was nothing peculiar.

My respondents were curious about my background and my reason for being in Panama but I never felt any distrust from their side. In Calle Belén I was a little more ‘the foreigner’, since most of the people attending this church were Panamanian. But also here: my respondents had traveled abroad or were second generation Panamanians themselves. Of course I assume they talked different to me than they would have done to a Panamanian girl. A conversation is always built on expectations of what somebody understands and wants to hear and in that sense I just stay an outsider. On the other hand being a foreigner had its advantages. It was interesting to do research in a familiar Chris-

tian environment but in a culturally different setting. Being a Latin American Studies freshman I was warned several times to put foreign cultural phenomena in the right perspective, comparing it to our own country. *Machismo* is a lot less serious if you compare it to Dutch female emancipation, which ranks under that of Pakistan. In the same way tithing in Latin American churches is often looked upon as a strange otherworldly act while in Dutch churches this is the standard as well. Thus being a foreigner had the advantage in the sense that I was able to compare church practices in a broader context of global Christianity.

Although my accent would always give away I was not a native speaker, the fact that I could speak Spanish with everybody made the communication considerably easier. Although talking over the phone in Spanish and following the fast Panamanian way of speaking was at first a challenge, I managed to get this down pat satisfactory over the course of my fieldwork period. Talking with people in their own tongue made them often forget I was doing research, I think. Using an interpreter would have made it impossible to blend in with the church community in a natural way. A second major characteristic of me as a researcher, interviewer and friend was the fact that I share the religious faith of my subjects. This characteristic of my identity had very clear advantages and disadvantages. According to Sundkler, one of the most prominent pioneers of research on African independent churches, it is inevitable to have a bias in anthropological research, whether the fieldworker is a Christian believer or an atheist. He rejects objectivity, finding the notion of disinterested social science a myth.

Obviously the writer's valuations and ideals enter into the investigation, from the collecting of the material itself, which is the fundamental stage, to the final presentation with its balancing of one viewpoint against another. (...) No doubt, I am myself, both as a Protestant missionary and as an investigator, a part of the problem, and I affect its future development by my missionary activity or inactivity (1961: 16).

Following this Swedish historian and missionary, I think I better criticize my own position then hide the fact I am a Christian, pointing out the consequences of this position. The advantages were apparent in making contacts with both individuals and churches. The pastor of Crossroads and his wife worked both for the church and for Wycliffe, a Bi-

ble translation organization.¹⁵ Coincidentally I have family who works for the same organization in Asia, which gave them immediately an idea of where I come from and what my intentions would be as a researcher. In both churches the pastors knew I was a Christian and they were happy to help me out with my research and make me feel at home. Approaching people individually they verified without exemption if I were a Christian, what church I attended in Holland, if my family was Christian etc. I felt comfortable talking about these things and did not have to hide anything. In participating research people regularly have problems with their respondents wanting to convert them (vid. e.g. Canton-Delgado, 1998; Huizenga, 2006: 13). In my case this never happened. I think that had to do both with the fact that people were well-traveled and educated and with them not seeing any need for it since I was already 'one of them'. As I had noticed before in traveling through Central America, being a Christian opened many doors and gave me easy acceptance in the Christian community.

Although I have an Evangelical background from my upbringing, this did not mean everything was entirely familiar. My understanding of Christian principles helped me follow along in sermons and home meetings without difficulty, but I found myself relearning the faith throughout the research as I studied the meaning it carried for the Panamanian believers. However, this touches immediately at my weakness: being fairly familiar with procedures I might have missed actions, rituals, words that would have been striking to others but were common to me. Many respondents for instance told me that in converting and going to their church they had gotten to know 'a living God'. This terminology is so common to me, almost cliché, that it took me several interviews to actually start asking what they really meant by this and how it contrasted with the god they knew before. Another disadvantage of my background is that I might be too positively biased towards Evangelicals. Even though I am on my guard for this inclination, it is very hard to keep my favorable feelings towards Christianity separated from the academical me.

From my experience of living in the city, I enjoyed the advantage of having first-hand knowledge about the day-to-day living and working. Just as everybody else I was stuck every day in heavy traffic, completely soaked by the unexpected showers of the

¹⁵ Wycliffe is a non-profit organization dedicated to making the Bible accessible to everyone in a language they are comfortable in.

rainy season and worried about the next skyscraper being planted in the neighborhood. The fact that I had a Panamanian boyfriend made me a potential countryman to people and a long-term relationship. Being part of a Panamanian family I was quickly incorporated in society which helped me to identify those elements that were relevant and challenging to the daily existence of middle-class Panamanians. I got to know the worries about booming real estate prices, the safety issues with the increasing number of Colombian immigrants and the importance of family relationships in every area of life. This does not sound as spectacular as learning to live in a slum full of crime and violence, but it was still a world very different of my own in which I had to learn what moves and motivates people. Living, literally, in the center of the city chaos had great advantages in understanding people's routines. The same is true for becoming friends with respondents. However, friendships are complicated things in a research setting. People might feel I become friends with them because they are potential respondents, and that is uncomfortable. Do people think I go to church because I like to go or because I need information? Do I ask that hard question in the interview or do I spare them from my critical attitude? In this I sometimes felt like a tightrope walker, but tried not to make a big deal out of it and follow my intuition on what to do or not do.

The writing process and analysis of data

The interviews I held with my respondents were semi-structured. After doing a few I figured out what were the most important questions and structured the interview around it. Although we would end up talking about subjects ranging from the latest movie we saw to marital problems, I would always make sure I had talked about the following subjects:

- What type of religiosity they were raised with, actively religious or not
- What faith and God had meant for them
- How they had 'gotten to know the Lord'
- How they had been introduced to an Evangelical church
- What they liked about the particular church they were going
- If they had ever considered joining a Catholic Church again, why or why not?

In the interviews the questions would not always come up in this order: sometimes people would start answering a question before I had even asked it or I would change order to

follow the line of conversation. Like everybody doing research, I felt that if I had had more time I could have learned to know people better, make more observations and find more data. Leaving the field therefore was rather justified by the date printed on my ticket than by running out of sources. On the other hand I realize it is probably never enough and it is good to finally sit down and see how the data I gathered in Panama relate to the books and articles I left on my desk in Holland.

- Chapter three -

THE RELIGIOUS FIELD OF PANAMA

When you enter *Dutch* and *Protestantism* in a university library catalogue in Holland a list of 798 items unrolls, ranging from subjects like the popularization of modern-theological thought in Holland between 1857 and 1880 to an analysis of Dutch Protestant food menus.¹⁶ The same queries give a significant different result in a Panamanian database. It might have to do with the small size of the population, the humidity that ruins every archive or the disunity between churches, but only few comprehensive publications on Panamanian Protestant history are to be found. In this chapter I will give an outline of the religious landscape in Panama, singling out the influence of Catholicism, Liberalism and Protestantism. Apart from just painting the scene I show in this chapter how a foreign faith landed in Panamanian Catholic society, becoming a home-grown movement for some and an alien movement to others.

Religious plurality

Although the constitution of 1972 recognizes the preeminence of Roman Catholicism, freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed in Panama. Walking through the streets of the capital one can witness this liberty being practiced. Within a two block radius of my house at Parque Urraca there was a Synagogue with a Yeshiva, the national office of Foursquare churches, the head office of an Assemblies of God church, a Catholic church and a Mormon temple. The censuses from 1910 to 2000 show how this plurality is not a new phenomenon caused by an increasing globalizing trend but a century old reality. These same censuses also show a few other things. First, it displays how all religious groups have had their ups and downs within the last sixty years. Catholicism diminishing

¹⁶ Respectively G. Harinck en M. Vos (2005) en M. F. Buitenwerf-van der Molen (2007).

a little bit, Protestantism doubling from almost six to twelve percent and secularization tripling from 0.9 to 3.2 percent. Second, it demonstrates how Panama has had many

Fig. 3.1 Religious affiliation in Panama according to the censuses of 1910-2000.

| | 1911 | | 1920 | | 1930 | | 1940 | | 2000 | |
|----------------|---------|------|------|------|---------|-------|---------|------|-----------|------|
| | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % | No. | % |
| Catholic | 267,736 | 79.2 | | 70.1 | 405,892 | 86.83 | 525,354 | 92.7 | 2,094,931 | 81.9 |
| Protestant | 26829 | 8.0 | | 27.1 | 35972 | 7.68 | 33196 | 5.8 | 311,967 | 12.2 |
| Buddhist | 2088 | 0.6 | | 0.8 | ? | ? | 1803 | 0.3 | 5731 | 0.2 |
| Jewish | 505 | 0.1 | | 0.2 | 850 | 0.2 | 2034 | 0.4 | 1059 | 0.0 |
| Hindu & Muslim | 119 | 0.04 | | 0.2 | ? | ? | 463 | 0.2 | ? | ? |
| Other | 39465 | 11.7 | | ? | 16642 | 3.57 | 425 | 0.1 | 64,442 | 2.5 |
| Nothing | ? | ? | | ? | 2488 | 0.54 | 3260 | 0.9 | 80,749 | 3.2 |
| Ignorado | ? | ? | | ? | 5615 | 1.2 | 54 | -1 | ? | ? |
| Total | 336,742 | 100 | | 98.4 | 467,459 | 100 | 566,589 | 100 | 2,558,879 | 100 |

Sources: censuses of the Controloría del Pueblo de Panamá.

different religions within their borders for a long time, never being a Catholic country *pur sang*.¹⁷ Last, this figure tells us something about how different religious groups were seen by the way they are divided up, called, or left out. It is for example curious to see how in most censuses Hindus and Muslims are lumped together.¹⁸ And to find a category called *ignorado*, unknown. According to the employees of the census office this used to mean the group of people confessing so called ‘indigenous’ or ‘traditional’ beliefs. But maybe the most striking is the lack of information between 1940 till 2000. For sixty years in a row there were no questions asked about religious affiliation in Panama. This can be ascribed to a certain carelessness towards religion, inherent to a country where commerce and transition are key characteristics. This commercial pragmatism expresses itself both in a relative high degree of tolerance towards other faiths and a relative low degree of religious zeal, described by Chong as *desidia* and *holgazanería*.

¹⁷ In the census of 1920 the number of Protestants is strikingly high. However this census is put together with the censuses of just five provinces, among which the most Protestant ones are presented. The national total would probably turn out lower if all provinces had been taken into account.

¹⁸ To makes things more confusing, a person from India (or Pakistan, for that matter) is in daily language called a ‘Hindú’ irrespective of being a Muslim or a Hindu by religion.

Cabe preguntarse, en torno al papel de la Iglesia en el Istmo de Panamá, al promediar el decimonono, qué visión tenía el criollo panameño frente a los motivos ideológicos de este ente espiritual. (...) Frente a cierto tipo de desidia y holgazanería prevaleciente en ciudades como Panamá, nuestros grupos oligárquicos no comulgaban con la idea de numerosos días festivos puesto que ello iba en detrimento de la lucrativa actividad comercial (1998: 99).

With the building of the transcontinental railroad by the French in the 1850s and the construction of the Canal in the early nineteenth century, it would not have been very lucrative to keep off foreign workers with their foreign faiths. The large projects brought forth the creation of a pluralistic society. At the same time Panama stays a Catholic country given that around three-quarter of citizens calls themselves Catholic (Census 2000; Johnson and Mandryk 2001; IESDE, 2004).

The Catholic Church in Panama

The Isthmus and the Catholic Church have a history together that goes back around 500 years. The first diocese of the Western Hemisphere's mainland was hosted by Panama and the oldest church in the country dates back as far as to 1510, called the Santa Maria Antigua del Darien. Under Spanish rule, both the Church and the religious orders required considerable wealth. Trans-shipment port for Andean minerals, Panama City was a key link in the chain of Spanish commerce during the colonial period. In the absence of organized commercial houses on the Isthmus, religious orders profited from the banking activities. And by lack of government institutions they established first-rate schools, a university and several elaborate churches (Holland, 2002: 19).

The tide changed considerably with the expulsion of the Jesuit order in 1767.¹⁹ A long period of religious apathy followed in which the Church lost substantial wealth. Later it was particularly the liberal thought of the nineteenth century and the effects of the European Enlightenment that led to a lack of interest and support for the Church in Panama. Although the country was spared from the strong anti-clericalism that swept the Spanish colonies at this time, the country underwent a period of marked decline in religious interest in the course of the twentieth century. This secularization got reinforced

¹⁹ This was part of the Bourbon reforms, a program of reform inspired by the French model consisting of a total overhaul of existing political and economical structures in which less room was left for religion. In Latin America the reforms led to the expulsion of the Jesuits and a restriction of the authority of the Inquisition, this to great dismay of the Creole aristocracy.

after the separation with Colombia in 1903, when Belisario Porras and Augusto Arosemena consciously made a separation between church and state during their presidencies. From the early years of the republic up until the late 1960s, the Catholic Church continued to emphasize its spiritual role and generally avoided the involvement in secular affairs they used to have earlier.

La Iglesia panameña de los mismos años '50 y '60 era, como el resto de la Iglesia Latinoamericana y prácticamente del mundo, una Iglesia sacramentalista y muy alejada de las realidades que vivían sus miembros (Blanco, 2003:160).

The involvement in politics increased again after the second Vatican Council in the early sixties and the Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín of 1968. Under the banner of “Preferential option for the poor” the Catholic Church in Latin America decided to become actively involved in issues concerning social justice, poverty and solidarity (Holland, 2002: 20). The ‘Experimento de San Miguelito’ described in an article by Fransisco Blanco is an early example of this tendency. The experiment started in 1963 when a few priests from Chicago decided to implement a pastoral and social program in San Miguelito, a poor neighborhood in the outskirts of Panama City. Their vision was to create a community that involved people in church life again and empowered them in their struggle to obtain facilities in the area, resulting in San Miguelito being a *Distrito Especial* today (2003: 159).

Después de dieciséis años de experiencia y, como veremos más adelante, habiendo superado muchas dificultades y conseguido muchos logros, sobre todo el de haber hecho tomar conciencia de su ser cristianos y ciudadanos con sus derechos y deberes, en 1979 se va de Panamá el último de los “Padres de Chicago” (op. cit.: 163).

Another new dimension of the Catholic Church emerged in the 1970s with the Catholic Charismatic Movement (CCM). This movement was set in by a Spanish priest and a Panamanian nun influenced by the Catholic charismatics in the U.S. Numerous Bible studies, prayer and fellowship groups were organized along with charismatic masses and rallies.²⁰ Soon Protestant pastors and laymen were participating in the movement, which

²⁰ For a recent and comprehensive overview on the Charismatic movement within the Catholic Church in Latin America see A. Chesnut's *Competitive Spirits* (2003).

then took on an ecumenical flavor (Holland, 2002: 14). Casa de Oración Cristiana, the church Grupo Belén came out of, had once been started by a small group in this charismatic movement. Till this moment, father David Cosca still conducts well-attended charismatic masses in the Iglesia las Esclavas in Paitilla.

The Catholic Church has attempted to revive active interest in religious affairs, raise church attendance and increase the incidence of church marriages. This continuing effort has been supported since the 1960s by a lay mission group La Santa Misión Católica. Supporting the local clergy, they first focused on the lower classes in the capital extending their activities to the rest of the country. It introduced Church-sponsored welfare projects and served to rouse Catholics from the lethargy, that according to Holland, had traditionally plagued the Church in Panama (op. cit.: 14). The current Roman Catholic Church holds a respected position in society and is a familiar facet of daily life. Catholicism is taught in the public school but is not compulsory. Still virtually every town has a Catholic church, although many do not have a resident priest, due to the small number of native clergy.²¹ The Catholic Church in Panama is described these days by foreign clergy serving in the country, as active and engaging according to Blanco (2007). At the same time he and others point to the pragmatist face of the church, stemming from Panama's political and economical history.

From liberalism to secularization

Unlike many other Latin American countries, the power of the landed elites never have been very strong. On the contrary, businessmen and merchants were the history makers on the Isthmus. This results in an important difference of attitude in which pragmatism overruled the conservatism of the landed elites.

Resumiendo, el pluralismo religioso y la ruptura de la hegemonía de la Iglesia es consecuencia de la secularización, que a su vez obedece a la modificación de las estructuras materiales de la sociedad, en especial económicas, que advertimos en nuestra historia constantemente desde la segunda mitad del siglo XVIII, cuya culminación simboliza el Canal de Panamá (Moreno, 1982: 84).

²¹ Originally, the leaders of the Catholic Church in Panama had to be Panamanian citizens by birth. This law was revoked in 1978 to not further complicate filling up vacancies.

According to this somewhat Marxist view of Moreno, Panama has a history of ongoing secularization and anti-spiritualism.²² With the separation from Colombia in 1903 the existing constitution continued to serve in the new Republic. This included the privileges for the Catholic Church. But when Belisario Porras became president in 1912 he slowly undid these preferences, convinced that state and church should not be intertwined.²³ He suspended the government aid to the Catholic seminary leading to a low number of native priests till the day of today. He created the *Registro Social*, making information on birth, death and marriage a state affair. By dismissing the Catholic Church from this task, the link between people and church became much weaker. Another law mandated co-education, to which the Catholic Church was opposed. A law for divorce came through in 1917, in Porras' second term. This is remarkable when compared to divorce laws in other countries: Canada in 1961, Holland in 1971 and Argentina in 1972.

All these measures together slowly pushed the Church out of the public sphere. However, it was not the laws *an sich* that were really so revolutionary. Latin American history tells us that one thing is making laws and another thing is executing them. The question therefore is: why were these laws put effectively into practice? According to Chong this had everything to do with the influence of trade and merchandise. He argues that the liberal ideology caught on in Panama because the oligarchy was already skeptic about the life style religion brought about. Religion was accepted as long as it did not impede economic progress. The numerous *días festivos* for example were seen by some as endangering the economic productivity.

Entonces habrá que tener mucho cuidado con una corriente religiosa, por ejemplo el catolicismo, que permitía todo genero de bondades hacia quienes violaban principios que no estaban en consonancia con el espíritu del trabajo, (...) Otra es la mentalidad de los grupos del campesinado rico, mas apegado a las tradiciones y a la conservación de los valores espirituales, eternos y absolutos que nos ha legado la Divina Providencia. (1998: 99).

²² Analyzing religion in the Panamanian society, he strongly promotes a secularizing paradigm. However, this paradigm in general has been questioned strongly by influential sociologists like mentioned in the introduction: Stark and Chaves. See also Crippen, Hadden, Finke and Iannecone.

²³ Another important figure in this line of thought was the earlier Augusto Arosemena (1817-1886). As lawyer and politician he was the central spokesman of liberal thought in Panama.

With the government providing schooling, health care and civil registration, social services were no longer exclusively in the hands of the Catholic Church. Vital Moreno sees this tendency as an ongoing process of secularization and argues that the Liberation Theology born in the 1960s only supported this trend. In Medellín they not only opted for the poor but also decided to bring the focus back to Jesus. From one day to another the priests took down most images and sculptures in church and public places, according to Vital Moreno. Not only did this take away many people's only link to the Church but also their confidence in the teachings so far.

Durante siglos, la iglesia Católica lo sostuvo y lo estimulo, de pronto, en muchos templos, fueron retiradas imágenes veneradas desde antaño. Que ocurrió? Una gran incomprensión. El creyente preguntaba: Porque los han quitado? Todo lo que enseñaban y yo creía estaba equivocado. No pocos de los 'sorprendidos' se fueron... a otra parte. La iglesia los perdió (Moreno, 1982: 77).

This 'Espíritu Nuevo' of Liberation Theology demystified the priest, making faith human instead of magical (Martinez, 2005:39). The Catholic faith had always been a magic type of faith and the sudden demystification was catastrophic for the Catholic Church. For many people the only thing that linked them to Christianity had been Mary and the saints. Priests used to be magicians and now turned out to be mere human beings (Moreno, 2007). So while the government had been reducing the Church's practical influence on society, they themselves decreased their spiritual impact on people with their new church profile.²⁴ In the next section we will see how this eventually created space for Evangelical churches. When the state slowly withdrew their social services from the large outskirts, leaving the police and *corregidor* as the only state representatives, Evangelical churches came to fill up the vacuum. This explains much about why poor sections of Panama join these churches. At the same time it also explains why for people in other strata of society the Evangelical church stayed a stranger: a foreign church for the poor and uneducated.

²⁴ As we see from the project in San Miguelito mentioned earlier, naturally there are exceptions to this statement.

The Protestant Church in Panama

The history of Protestantism in Panama can only be told from a very denominational angle. Often, though not always, churches in Panama started out from a specific Protestant 'brand'. This differs from Europe where Protestantism started rather with one act of criticism and only later split up in a large number of different branches. When missionaries came to Panama, they were sent from their individual church or denomination and wrote their own individual history resulting in the absence of a comprehensive story. To make the story more complicated, many of these original denominational churches got their local spin-offs, again adding a new color to the spectrum. Anderson comments about this that 'The diversity and schismatic fragmentation of Pentecostal groups make it difficult, if not impossible to categorize Pentecostalism in Latin America, and categories created in the North simply will not fit (2004: 64). Despite this fragmentation, a overview of the Protestant history in Panama will be created in the next section.

Introduction of the Protestant historical churches: 1865-1903

The first known Protestants to arrive in present day Panama were the Wesleyan Methodists. A Mulatto lady, Mother Abel, landed between 1815-1825 at Careening Cay in western Panama with a party of English and Jamaican settlers. Mother Abel evangelized among the Creole fisher folk on the Caribbean coast of the Bocas del Toro region. She formed and led the Methodist community for more than sixty years eventually passing it over to the care of the Wesleyan Methodists when the circuit was reorganized in 1913. In this same period a Methodist missionary was sent out from a Jamaican community to Panama City in 1884.²⁵ The Rev. Thomas Geddes and later his son Alexander started work in Panama City, Emperador and Aspinwall (now Puerto Colón). First they formed congregations mainly among the 15.000 West Indian immigrants working on the French canal, in Panama City and Colon. Later their focus shifted to the West Indians working on the banana plantations of Bocas del Toro and Chiriquí (Holland, 2002: 21; Moreno, 1983: 88).

The Protestant Episcopal Church (Anglican) was apparently the first Protestant church to be formally organized with a resident minister in Panama City, when Christ

²⁵ Vital Moreno gives this as the first arrival of Methodists on the Isthmus.

Church By-the-Sea was founded.²⁶ Occasional services had been held on the Isthmus as early as 1849 by Episcopal clergymen on their way to the Californian gold fields, but it was only in 1851 that the first congregation was organized on Taboga, one of the islands just off the coast. This church developed several mission stations in the Canal Zone and in Bocas del Toro, initially serving West Indians and Americans, later focusing more on the Spanish-speaking community (Holland, 2002: 22).

One group that quickly gained many adherents and still forms one of the larger churches in Panama, is the Seventh Day Adventists. This American denomination established their headquarters in Bocas del Toro in 1901 where they planted three churches and four missions.²⁷ Six years later they founded a church among the West Indians in the Canal Zone. Following the Protestant Episcopalians, several schools were opened in both the Canal Zone and Chiriquí. Initially they ministered mainly among the West Indians, but later extended their activities to the various Amerindian groups in Panama. It was in the thirties that they planted a church with the Guaymí in Chiriquí and among the Kuna Indians on the San Blas Islands and Chocó in the Darien region in the sixties. Interestingly, a decade later the membership of Hispanics increased rapidly from 40 percent to 60 percent, eventually outnumbering the West Indians and Amerindians (op. cit.: 25-27). Other groups coming to Panama in the last days of Colombian governance were Baptists from Jamaica in 1890 and the Jehovah's Witnesses arriving in 1900 (Moreno, 1983: 88, 109).



Fig. 3.2 Panama national territory

²⁶ This church was the second non-Roman Catholic church built in Central America, the first being in Belize City.

²⁷ According to Moreno they only came in 1906 together with the Episcopalians (1983: 89).

The Panama Canal and the influx of American churches

After the Hay-Brunau-Varilla Treaty was signed in 1903 the U.S. got full control over the Panama Canal Zone for the mere sum of 10 million dollars. The construction project that followed had a large impact on every aspect of Panamanian society, including religion. Several American denominations started up churches in the Zone or used this as their basis from which to enter the Republic. A well documented group that arrived in this period is the Southern Baptists. In order to serve the North Americans in the Canal Zone the Home Mission Board had sent a minister as early as 1905. Three years later they started reaching out to the West Indians along the Canal route. The First Baptist Church of Balboa was established that same year by Americans and five other churches were planted in the Zone to serve civilians and military personnel.

Prior to the 1940s, Southern Baptist work was largely limited to the Americans and West Indians in the Canal Zone and the cities of Colón and Panama. In this period however, the Home Mission Board decided to increase their efforts among the Spanish-speaking communities in Panama and a church was planted in Panama City (1943) and Chorrera (1947). Ten years later they incorporated work among the Kuna Indians in San Blas (Holland, 2002: 27-28). Another denomination arriving in 1904 was the Salvation Army, whose main activity was supporting the marginalized sectors of the population (Moreno, 1983: 88). Other American groups that came under the construction years of the Canal, but are lacking historical data, are the Church of God from Anderson, Indiana established in 1907 and the Union Church who arrived in 1914, right when the Canal was finished.

The Evangelical wave

So far the churches that arrived in Panama had mostly been institutionalized churches that were well-established in their home country. In Panama they planted churches and missions according to the guidelines from their home board. This slowly started to change in the wake of World War II and continued into the sixties with the arrival of more non-denominational churches and organizations. A good example of this type of church is the New Tribes Mission. In 1952 they initiated evangelistic work among the Amerindians of Panama, planting numerous congregations in their communities. Their

strategy is to let local leaders evangelize their own people as soon as churches are formed. All local congregations are independent with no official ties among each other. Every one of them has a nucleus of baptized believers and several ordained elders. The strategy of the New Tribes Mission is that “a rapid spreading of the Gospel is best done where there is the least outside effort to control and limit” (Holland, 2002: 29). This ideology led to the organization of 46 congregations with 3,000 members in 1970s, doubling their membership towards 2000 (Johnson and Mandryk, 2001). The New Tribes Mission strategy illustrates the advantage of this Evangelical improvisation over the Catholic institutionalized way of working. The difficulty is, according to Moreno, that the Catholic faith has always been costly and very hard to transport, while Evangelical churches in Panama are simply born in tent campaigns (2007).

It is nearly impossible to go over the historical facts of all the small denominations founded in Panama in this period.²⁸ Among them are the Central America Mission (1944), the Gospel Missionary Union (1952), the Evangelical Mission of Panama (1961), the United Gospel Church (1961), the Free Will Baptist Church (1964), the Assemblies of God (1967) and many others. A lot of these never had more than 500 members. However, there are two denominations I would like to go further into for they would eventually become the main representatives of Protestantism in Panama (Holland, 2002: 30).

One of the early Evangelical churches in the country is represented by the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. For a long time this church was a *pars pro toto* for Protestantism in Panama, Evangelicals being called *los salva cuatro*. The origin of the Foursquare Church in Panama goes back to 1928, when a Californian reverent and his wife arrived in Panama. They were one of the first Foursquare missionaries to be sent out and Panama then was a logical option due to its closeness with the U.S. in these days. Their pastoral efforts were somewhat disappointing until a dynamic healing took place at a chapel halfway the railroad from Colón to Panama City. News of their message quickly spread not only including divine healing but also the baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in other tongues. The sudden revival lasted several years in which the church grew rapidly involving many laymen in their organization. Although started in the Canal

²⁸ The *Directorio Interdenominacional* produced in 2002-2003 by Erick Barrios gives 154 national movements and councils.

Zone, 95 percent of the membership was Spanish-speaking in the 1950s and 98 percent in 1979 (op. cit.: 30). In 2000 the church counted 720 congregations with over 54.000 members. Although they never suffered a major division in Panama, several leaders have left the denomination because of doctrinal differences. They started their own movements like the Evangelistic Doctrinal Church of Pilón (1940), the New Life Evangelical Church (1967) and the Evangelistic Doctrinal Church (1970) among others (op. cit.: 30-32).

Another big player in the local Protestant field is the U.S. originated Assemblies of God. Their work in Panama only dates back to 1967 when they became known throughout the country for their Evangelistic crusades.²⁹ Large tent campaigns drew thousands of people resulting in planting 16 churches in the following seven years. One of them was Casa de Oración. Carmen González, an early convert in the crusades, was a co-founder of this congregation. A few months after her conversion, she traveled to the U.S. and was introduced to the Catholic charismatic movement there. Some time after her return, she and María Ramos became leaders in the early charismatic movement in Panama that gathered in the Iglesia de Guadalupe. After a period they were requested to leave and so they began a meeting in María's house. This group became known as Casa de Oración (op. cit.: 34). The largest congregation of the Assemblies of God is the central church in Panama City called *Catedral de Vida* in the outskirts of the city hosting a few thousand people every week. Hosanna, Panama's biggest church is equally a spin-off from the Assemblies of God.

Although these two large churches in Panama originated in the U.S. we should not consider them as a mere American importation or creation. Like in the Netherlands they make use of their international networks for conferences, music and literature, but straight influence or finances are usually not involved. Anderson noted that the planting of the Assemblies of God in Costa Rica was soon followed by the founding of local organizations. "With this development has occurred the Latinization of Pentecostalism, use being made of several daily services, public processions and Latino music and rhythms and worship" (2004: 77). Like in Costa Rica, this process of nationalization equally applies to the evangelical developments in Panama, looking at the high degree of organizational independence.

²⁹ Their tent campaigns were called the *Gran Campaña de Sanidad Divina* in those years.

Sociology of Panamanian Protestantism

Protestantism in Panama originally had a large following among the English-speaking Canal Zone population, mostly West Indians and North Americans. Figure 3.3 shows however how this changed over time. In the 1930s the Protestant membership consisted for more than fifty percent of Zonians. 25 Years later the majority of Protestants are Panamanians living in the republic. Only a slight minority can be found in the Canal Zone this time.

Fig. 3.3 Distribution of Protestants over the Republic and the Canal Zone in %

| | Republic of Panama % | Canal Zone % | Total % |
|------|----------------------|--------------|---------|
| 1935 | 48 | 52 | 100 |
| 1960 | 90 | 10 | 100 |
| 1978 | 95 | 5 | 100 |

Source: Holland, 2002: 15

Another common assumption is that the majority of Protestants in Panama are ‘black people’, West Indians who brought their faith with them when working in the Canal construction or banana plantations. Protestantism indeed came about this way but the original distribution gave way to a situation in which two-third of Protestants are considered mestizo.

Fig. 3.4 Protestant population divided by race 1960-1978 in %

| | West-Indian | Amerindian | Mestizo | American |
|------|-------------|------------|---------|----------|
| 1960 | 33.4 | 11.9 | 44.3 | 10.5 |
| 1978 | 17.5 | 9.3 | 68.7 | 4.6 |

Source: Holland, 2002: 15

A third characteristic of Protestantism in Panama is, like in the rest of Latin America, the popularity of Pentecostal churches. An overview of Protestantism membership between 1935 en 1978 reveals that proportionally the liturgical family (i.e. traditional Protestant churches) declined while the Pentecostal family strongly increased.

Fig. 3.5 Protestant population divided by family of denominations by %

| | Liturgical Family | Evangelical non-Pentecostal family | Adventists Family | Pentecostals family |
|------|-------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1935 | 40.6 | 40.2 | 17.9 | 1.3 |
| 1960 | 15.1 | 33.3 | 14.8 | 36.9 |
| 1978 | 6.7 | 27.0 | 16.1 | 50.2 |

Source: Holland, 2002: 16

Although these figures show numbers from an early period, it explains how a statistical figure of Johnstone and Mandryke can come about, showing how since the 1960s the Methodists, Episcopalians and Baptists became outnumbered by the Assemblies of God and the Foursquare Gospel.

Fig. 3.6 Largest denominations in Panama in 2000

| Churches | Congregations | Members | Affiliates |
|--------------------------------|---------------|-----------|------------|
| Catholic Church | 184 | 1,200,559 | 2,149,000 |
| Assemblies of God | 450 | 60,000 | 142,000 |
| Foursquare Gospel | 720 | 54,102 | 108,000 |
| 7 th Day Adventists | 147 | 35,300 | 62,000 |
| Latter-day Saints (Morm.) | 42 | 17,460 | 33,000 |
| Church of God (Clev.) | 180 | 12,275 | 36,650 |
| Jehovah's witnesses | 195 | 9,695 | 28,000 |
| Episcopal | 29 | 7,057 | 23,500 |
| Baptist Convention | 96 | 6,897 | 16,259 |
| New Tribes Mission | 50 | 6,000 | 11,000 |
| Churches of Christ | 115 | 5,000 | 12,500 |
| Guaymi Ev. Christian Ass. | 34 | 5,000 | 10,000 |
| Pentecostal Christian | 17 | 3,000 | 6,000 |
| Methodist | 8 | 2,200 | 7,500 |
| Church of Nazarene | 37 | 2,100 | 3,200 |
| Other denom. | 628 | 52,173 | 156,924 |
| Doubly affiliated | | -173,653 | -290,000 |
| Total | 2,932 | 1,305,653 | 2,515,500 |

Source: Johnstone and Mandryke, 2000³⁰

This figure shows the problem of making statistics on religious adherents: it's hard to be precise. The numbers of affiliates based on self-report of the Catholic Church for instance are estimated to be more than 4 millions while Panama only has a little over 3 million inhabitants. Likewise, one can only estimate the number of religious affiliates in Panama.

³⁰ Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk are in a constant process of gathering numbers for their book *Operation World* that issues every few years. This is a prayer manual for Christians. Their statistics are regularly used for academical purposes but not peer reviewed.

Johnstone and Mandryk give a number around 18 percent Protestants, both Evangelical and traditional (2001). The census publicized in the same year as their publication however showed only a number of 12.2 percent.³¹ And the inquiry done by the Ecumenical institute in Panama under 1200 people again only gives 13 percent Protestants compared to 79 percent Catholics (IESDE, 2004). Professor Vidal Moreno thought the numbers of this census did not give a good impression. Being convinced of a secularizing tendency, he thought the number of non-believers should be around 20 percent instead of 3 and the number of Protestants also around 20 (Moreno, 2007).³² Radio Hosanna, going on numbers of a local newspaper, are claiming 16 percent of the population to be Evangelical (traditional Protestants not taken into account) (*La Prensa*, 9/4/2004). Although the numbers of religious affiliates are diverging it gives an idea of the amount of people we are talking about: between 12 to 20 percent of the population. With this they are quite average compared to the rest of Central America.

Fig. 3.7. Christians and Evangelicals as percentage of the total population in Central America and Colombia.

| Country | % Christian | % Evangelical |
|-------------|-------------|---------------|
| Colombia | 95.5 | 4.7 |
| Costa Rica | 94.7 | 12.4 |
| Nicaragua | 90.9 | 16.3 |
| Honduras | 96.7 | 17.7 |
| El Salvador | 97.3 | 21.7 |
| Guatemala | 97.5 | 26.0 |
| Panama | 88.1 | 18.2 |

Source: Johnstone and Mandryke, 2000

In the same inquiry of the IESDE questions are asked about changing religion. In the last 10 years 4.3 percent of the respondents say to have changed church. This seems a little low if you look at the growth numbers. Almost 60 percent of the people that changed af-

³¹ Note that this census gives no numbers on adherents of the Islam! This, while according to Johnstone and Mandryk this is the biggest group after Christian affiliates, 3.5 percent.

³² Note that even though Vidal Moreno thinks the group of non-believers is around 20 percent, both the Census and Johnstone and Mandryk give 3 percent.

filiation went from a Catholic to an Evangelical church.³³ Interestingly enough nobody who earned more than 2000 dollar per month switched, not from Evangelical to Catholic nor to anything else.

Fig. 3.8 Relation between the income and type of church switch people make

| Income | <400 \$ | 400-599\$ | 600-999\$ | 1000-1999\$ | >2000\$ |
|-------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|-------------|---------|
| Cath. to Evan. | 100 | 33 | 25 | 100 | 0 |
| Other | 0 | 67 | 75 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 0 |

This figure shows another peculiar thing. Everybody who changes church and earns less than 400 dollars a month or between a 1000 and a 1999 dollars a month, changed from being Catholic to Evangelical. But in other categories this particular switch is only made in less than one-third of the cases. So one can conclude that from the people that switch to an Evangelical church a high portion is either lower or middle class.

Summarizing

In this chapter I have tried to give a rough sketch of the religious field in Panama. Since its foundation, Panama has been a religiously diverse country being a crossroads of trade and migration. This diversity was intensified by the construction of the canal, the railroad and the banana plantations. Although diverse, Catholicism is taking center stage and is officially recognized by the Constitution as the faith of the majority. Still, it has never been as dominant as in many other Latin American countries due to merchants promoting pragmatism and politicians advocating liberalism. Protestantism therefore was easily introduced on the Isthmus with the arrival of West Indian laborers in the second half of the nineteenth century. To assume however that Protestantism is a faith of the black margin would be a mistake. Churches were first planted in the Canal Zone and Bocas del Toro but soon spread into Indian territories and the cities due to the missionary zeal of the traditional Protestant churches. Evangelization really took off with the Evangelical movement arriving in the course of the twentieth century. Because of the Canal, Panama was

³³ The others switched in equal parts (8.3%) from Catholic to Adventist, Jehova's Witnesses, Mormons; from Baptist to Adventist, and back to Catholicism.

an easy country to enter for Americans and numerous denominations and organizations rapidly planted their churches. Although coming from abroad they soon became home-grown movements with local staff and financial support. Initially the mission focus was on the West Indians and indigenous population but moved over time to the mestizo populace until they represented two-third of the Protestant population in the late seventies. Many of these churches can be found in the poor outskirts of Panama City in which the government has slowly withdrawn their social services they had introduced in the first half of the twentieth century. This has lead to the idea that Evangelical churches are for the poor and uneducated. The numbers of the Ecumenical Institute confirms this thought, but they also show that not all Panamanian Evangelicals are destitute. In statistics of the Ecumenical center the converts are either lower class (earning less than 400\$ a month) or middle class (earning between 1000-1999\$ a month). In the next chapter I will introduce two churches who cater to the latter and look into why and how they appeal to this group.

- Chapter four -

CROSSROADS & CALLE BELÉN

“Usually the lower-class position of Pentecostal believers is referred to as a generalized characteristic.”

(Droogers, 1998:9)

In this chapter the churches of my fieldwork will be introduced. I will give a short historical outline of the two congregations and where they fit into the religious field of Panama as described in the former chapter. Both churches have their daily routines and organizing structures. Having to cope with the stereotype of Evangelical churches being for the poor and uneducated they have done this in a way that makes them more accessible to middle class people. I will argue that these characteristics, that distinguish them from other Evangelical churches, make them not fit the usual academic picture anymore.

Historical roots

Crossroads International Bible Church

Put in the perspective of the former chapter, Crossroads is a little hard to categorize, being both a traditionally Protestant church and a newer Evangelical church. They started out just after World War II as a non-denominational Bible study group of American Zionians, evolving over 60 years into a bi-lingual church catering to both Panamanian and international professionals. Crossroad was started with six people coming together for a prayer meeting in the Canal Zone, July 1946. They had a vision for the formation of a Bible study program in Curundu, a neighborhood of Panama City. Two months later this resulted in a first service in the Army civilian community of what then was called Balboa Christian Church. For the first seven years of its existence, the church was pastored by

various chaplains provided by the military. The congregation eventually got discouraged by their high flow rate and sometimes unsuitability.³⁴ Thus a civilian pastor was hired from 1954 on. Under the leadership of the second reverend, the Ref. Milton Leidig, annual missionary conferences were organized for missionaries working in Panama and a house-to-house visitation program was begun. The missionary outreaches and Bible study program in those years grew out to an average of 200 to 250 weekly visitors.

In the seventies the church was notified to relocate off the military reservation or cease its operations. Not being affiliated with any larger organization pursuing their own property would be a big step. Still the members of Crossroads voted unanimously to build a new church building and a committee was formed to retain permission to build on Canal property. Major revisions were made to the Constitution and By-laws, and the church became incorporated as the Crossroads Gospel Association, under the laws of the state of Delaware. The \$150,000 for the construction of the building in Corozal was provided by members and friends of the church, now baptized as Crossroads International Bible Church. A few years later a translation system was installed, which enabled simultaneous translation serving the Spanish speaking population.

In 1984 the current pastor Bob Gunn was asked to become the pastor of Crossroads. At that point he and his wife Mary were working on a Buglere Bible translation with Wycliffe. They left the country under Noriega's rule in 1988, but resumed position ten years later. In their absence the church had undergone many changes. With the signing of the Panama Canal Treaties and final turnover of the Canal at the end of 1999, there were almost no U.S. military personnel and American Canal workers left. According to Gunn they would come together in this period with around 30 people. In the seven years that followed Crossroads renewed itself as a church focusing on the English speaking international business community in Panama City and their Panamanian counterparts. Although there is no official number, Gunn thought around 700 people total attend the three services every Sunday. The church continues to be a non denominational, independent church, not related to other church organizations (www.crossroadspanama.org).³⁵

³⁴ Interview with Bob Gunn. Pastor of Crossroads and translator with Wycliffe under the Ngöbe Buglé in Panama. June 2007, Panama City.

³⁵ Interview Bob Gunn.

Grupo Cristiano Calle Belén

Calle Belén was born from the church Casa de Oración Cristiana who again has its roots in the Movimiento Católico Pentecostal. This movement started in 1973 in the Catholic Church and met as a prayer group for two years in a school in the neighborhood Paitilla. At a certain point they were asked to leave however and moved to a group member's home. The reason for leaving the Catholic Church were diplomatically explained as 'needing more space to do the things they thought were important'.³⁶ and 'doctrinal differences, like worshipping the virgin'.³⁷

The prayer group that continued consisted of professionals and people who would not necessarily go to an Evangelical church. Pastor Jorge Rodríguez, who in his daytime is professor and student advisor at the Technical University of Panama, explained that this group was purposefully called 'Casa' instead of church, to lower the threshold for people to come. 'En Panamá se ve la iglesia evangélica como Protestante, como algo diferente,' he explained. When the initial prayer group grew out of the family home they moved to different places ending up in Chanis, a middle class neighborhood in Panama City. As early as four years after leaving the Catholic Church they joined the General Council of the Assemblies of God and today have around 1500 people attending every week.

In 1991 Casa de Oración started with a system of small groups at member's houses to pray and do Bible study. Jorge and Carmen Rodríguez hosted one such group meeting with six people every Tuesday. Soon this grew out to thirty people and thus they moved to a different location. For fifteen years they stayed within Casa de Oración as a 'large' small group, moving each time they grew out of their location. Some people would attend both the small group on Tuesdays and join the general Sunday service; other people only visited the small group. With the latter group becoming bigger they asked permission from Casa de Oración to start their own services. In 2005 they were sent out of their mother church on good terms and started their own services with the

³⁶ Interview with Javier Cedeño. Pastor of Casa de Oración and medical doctor in Panama City. June 2007, Panama City.

³⁷ Interview with Jorge Rodríguez. Pastor of Calle Belén and professor at the Universidad Tecnológica de Panamá. August 2007, Panama City.

Rodríguez' as pastors. Now they are meeting three times per week in a hotel in Paitilla with around 300 people (www.grupocallebelen.com; www.cocpanama.com).³⁸

Although the two churches have a very different founding history, they have a few things in common. First of all, both started out as a small group of like-minded people, gradually evolving into a church. Crossroads began as a group with the vision to set up Bible education for children which grew into church services. Calle Belén commenced as a small group from Casa de Oración. This changed when they realized over the course of the years that their members and potential new members would feel more comfortable in a separately held service.

Another characteristic is that they both had a relatively current point of renewal. Calle Belén started as a small group in 1991 but became an independent church two years ago. Crossroads has a long history on itself but saw their church almost empty when the Canal was handed over in 1999. Most of their current 700 members only joined after 2000. Additionally, both churches have the same type of membership: professionals and entrepreneurs. This is not entirely coincidental. Both churches have made it part of their vision to create a place for middle to higher class people. In the next sections I will examine more closely what inspired this vision and the way this works out in daily practice.

Daily routines

The two churches have several activities scheduled every week, divided up in what are called *ministries*. Calle Belén has a church service on Sunday afternoon and a general Bible study on Tuesday. Every Wednesday there are separate meetings for men and women, with Bible study as main activity again and every Friday a general prayer meeting is taking place in the office of one of the church members. Crossroads holds three identical services on Sunday and small groups on Thursdays. Parallel to the second service is a meeting for people who want a more profound Bible study after attending the first service. Additionally, they have numerous different groups organized around a theme which people can join to serve church or society: music, church maintenance, prison ministry, evangelization etc. Although it is appreciated that people always come, it is not frowned upon if you skip a service. In both churches 'religiousness', i.e. following

³⁸ Interview with Javier Cedeño and Jorge Rodríguez.

certain rules, is not seen as livesaving. Instead, as expressed in the 'Crossroads Core Values', they rather put a large emphasis on a personal relationship with God and the daily exercise of this relationship.

We are committed to make worship a way of life, exalting the living God and celebrating His presence in our lives in everything we do.
(www.crossroadspanama.org).

The church services have quite a regular order. When you come into Crossroads church you are greeted by the door by two ushers. If you are early, people sit where ever they want and go over to others to chat until the service is bound to start. If you come in late you get a seat appointed by the ushers. The service starts with singing a few songs accompanied by mainly a piano, guitar and drums. With a beamer, the lyrics are projected on two white screens. The music consists of English hymns, worship music produced in the U.S. and Australia.³⁹ This is equally mixed in with songs in Spanish translated from the latter or produced by Latin American musicians.⁴⁰ With singing people clap or lift up their hands, but they do not speak in tongues aloud and stay in their pew, although rising whenever they want.⁴¹ The songs are followed by announcements, sometimes presented with a humorous skit (like a ladies retreat and a youth mission trip) followed by a sermon. Under every seat lies a Spanish or English Bible for people to read along during the half hour preaching. The sermon and Bible studies are in conformity with the doctrinal position of the church written down in their statement of faith. This leaves a lot of latitude for secondary doctrines but holds the Bible as an infallible guide line.

We believe that full and final authority rests in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, that they are the inspired revelation of God's truth to man, completely trustworthy and the only and sufficient rule for faith and practice. II Timothy 3:15-17; II Peter 1:19-21. (www.crossroadspanama.org).

After the service people would stand around for a long time, drinking coffee and chat. The service always started in time and lasted an hour and fifteen minutes. Bob Gunn and his son Steve normally preached and gave the Bible study during the second service, but

³⁹ i.e. music by Hillsongs, Brian Doerksen, Michael W. Smith etc.

⁴⁰ i.e. music by Marcos Witt, Jesus Adrian Romero, Marcos Vidal etc.

⁴¹ Contrary to historical Protestant en Catholic Church were rising and sitting down are fixed parts in the liturgy.

in the time I was there the youth pastor and children pastor also preached one time. Women do not usually preach during the church services. They also do not hold positions as pastors or elders but do sit in the deacon and trustee board and are involved in all other activities in church. The board members are nominated by the elders and voted on by the congregation (www.crossroadspanama.org).⁴² Half way my period in Panama City I also joined a small group of Crossroads. With around seven people we would come together on Thursday evenings, watch a video with a contemplation on a specific subject, discuss this and pray for each others personal matters: jobs, study, illnesses etc. The atmosphere was rather welcoming and open, even though they knew I was only with them for a short period. I joined this group without research purpose, just for fun and to get to know more people. Regardless I noticed it automatically involved me more in the Crossroads community.

At Calle Belén I would usually go to the Tuesday meeting and the women meeting on Wednesday. The first is a general Bible study attended by approximately 200 people, without any music and just a 45 minute teaching and ten minutes time of prayer. During the lecture people read along in their Bibles and made notes. In the prayer time people raised their hands and shortly brought up their prayer requests: for example health, wisdom, financial strain, family complications. The pastor made an inventory of about 15 of these requests and said a prayer summarizing the different points. It was surprising to see how swift and efficient this matter, which often can take up a lot of time, was dealt with.

The women meeting on Wednesday was a more intimate reunion with around forty ladies. The room was set up with a few rows of seats facing each other in an egg-shape circle. At the head of the circle two women lead the Bible study that was started and closed with prayer. Although one always tried to start in time, several would arrive late, coming straight from work. In the time I was there they discussed women in the Old Testament like Rebecca, Sarah, and Ruth. During the studies we looked at the stories of these women and how the lessons learned from their lives apply on our twentieth century daily life. Although it was led by appointed people, everyone could add in comments and questions, which indeed frequently happened. After the Bible study a prayer is held in

⁴² Correspondence with Bob Gunn. October 2007.

which a blessing and God's assistance was asked for all the facets of the congregation: the children, the singles, the families, the hotel management, the sick etc. After that, 15 minutes was reserved to get together in a small group and evaluate the Bible study and pray again for more personal matters. The reunion closed with drinks, snacks and chatting until the men came in and we were kindly requested to leave the room to make room for their meeting.

Haven of the educated: appealing to the middle class

It was as early as 1969 that Christian Lalive d'Epinau wrote one of the first works on Pentecostalism in Latin America, *Haven of the Masses: A study of the Pentecostal movement in Chile*. He explains the explosive growth of Evangelical churches in Chile by pointing to the dislocation brought about by migration, urbanization and modernization. Poor people flock to Evangelical churches looking for a new family and a new *hacendero* to structure their lives, supporting herewith the economic and political status quo. Like in the rest of Latin America this argument might be equally true for Panama. Evangelical churches have popped up in every part of the capital and usually being the first concrete building at the newly occupied lands on the outskirts that slowly eat away the surrounding jungle. This brings about the image that Pentecostalism is mainly for the poor and uneducated who need to hang on to something when everything in live is wanting. This impression is confirmed and even celebrated by academics who, contrary to Lalive, see Evangelicalism as a tool for upward mobility and empowerment of the Latin American poor (vid. e.g. Smith, 1998; Mariz, 1994 and 1998; Boudewijnse, 1998).

The idea of churches playing into the feeling orientedness of people is supported by Moreno who explains the growth of Evangelical churches in Panama by how they bring 'magic' back into the services after the Catholic Church purposefully undid itself of this in the seventies. Added to the Evangelical effectiveness in countering social needs they have been successful in reintroducing magical elements back in church in the form of healing, exorcism, emphasizing the power of prayer and spiritual warfare. With this existing image of Evangelical churches little attention is paid to ones in the margin that try to counter the stigma they got over the last half a century. To be able to give a home to a growing interested middle class they need a different strategy to be successful.

The difference is that many lower class churches are very *feeling* oriented and Pentecostalism fits their culture very well. The upper class is better educated and therefore much more *cognitive* oriented. In Panama they are virtually an un-reached group. Their perception of Evangelical churches is that they steal people's money, you have to leave your brains at the door and do all these weird spiritual things.⁴³

Both Crossroads and Calle Belén have organized themselves in a way that avoids the poverty-stigma and to appeal to a market little catered for. Everybody was welcomed, but since people are often introduced to church by a friend, family or colleagues a certain homogeneity is generated. From 2005 on Calle Belén started their services at Tuesday nights in Paitilla Inn, a hotel located in Paitilla. This neighborhood is the face of the city, decorating every post card with the manifold of skyscrapers beholding apartments overlooking the ocean or the city, or both. The services of Calle Belén are held in this hotel on purpose.

... ahora nos reunimos en un hotel, antes nos reunimos en casas. Estamos en un hotel ya hace como cinco, seis años. Y eso resulta muy bueno para las personas que están nuevas en el evangelio. Porque ellos no quieren ir a un templo evangélico, sino a un lugar neutral. Y ellos se sienten cómodos, escuchan la palabra, se convierten, se comprometen: son buenos cristianos. Pero permanece en un hotel porque es una buena estrategia para alcanzar a gente nueva.⁴⁴

According to Rodríguez it has been important for the growth of their church that they meet on neutral ground because people can be embarrassed to come to an Evangelical church. Panama is a Catholic country by tradition and people feel easily threatened by different churches entering the country, he said. He adds two other reasons for people to be suspicious of Evangelical churches.

Lo otro es que hay iglesias que se caracterizan por ser muy escandalosas, mucha bulla, mucha manifestaciones. Y eso ha asustada a la gente. (...). Aparte, que cuando llegó el evangelio aquí en Panamá primeramente tuvo un primer impacto entre la gente de estrato humilde, ósea gente con poca educación o pocos recursos económicos, ves? Por un tiempo se pensara que la iglesia evangélica era para gente que no tienen estudio o que están en una mala situación económica. Entonces todo eso resulto en que la gente se sienta como que 'ah no, sí no es católico no voy', no?⁴⁵

⁴³ Interview Bob Gunn.

⁴⁴ Interview Jorge Rodríguez.

⁴⁵ Interview Jorge Rodríguez.

We notice that Rodríguez gives two reasons for people to mistrust Evangelical churches, 1) they are mainly attended by poor people and 2) the services are disturbing.⁴⁶ He does not denounce poverty but indicates that it makes people from other strata suspicious. One usually listens to his own kind of people and that is why Evangelical churches not always appeal to people that are better off, said Rodríguez in the same interview. Especially in this place where social control is relatively high due to a small number of citizens and strong social cohesion. This is illustrated by a respondent from Calle Belén who jokingly, but in full fairness said she would always park her car around the corner from the building of Casa de Oración, so her car would not be recognized. To overcome people's reservation against Evangelical churches Calle Belén decided to at least not let the location be the stumbling stone.

Another reason that came up earlier in a quote of Gunn, is the bad name Evangelical churches have for asking ten percent of people's income. It struck me that this was usually the first subject non-Evangelical Panamanians would bring up when I told them about my research topic: 'these churches steal poor people's money'. Moreno explains why people tithe, framing the action not so much as churches stealing money but rather people paying a price for a better lifestyle. Since the Panamanian government withdrew their social services from poor neighborhoods, Evangelical church filled the created gap. People indeed pay ten percent of their income but the result is that they stop drinking, stop paying more than half of their income on extramarital affairs and stop going to the casino. 'Piensan que son bendiciones de Dios pero es una cosa muy lógica. El diezmo es el precio para reorganizar la vida'.⁴⁷

Franklin Hurtado, Methodist elder but educated at the local Assemblies of God Bible school, explained the tithing practice as follows. Pentecostal pastors are usually not paid by a council of churches, but by their own church members. So the more people come, the more income they have. This motivates pastors to actively evangelize and make his congregation do the same: 'se ha convertido en una manera de vida', Hurtado said. Most people in Neo-Pentecostal churches are quite *humilde* and they pay because

⁴⁶ Another interesting detail of this quote is 'cuando llegó el evangelio aquí en Panamá primeramente' referring to the arrival of the Evangelical churches in the twentieth century. Therewith leaving out of account the arrival of the evangelio 400 years earlier by Catholic representatives.

⁴⁷ Interview with Vital Moreno. Professor of history at the USMA. August, 2007, Panama City.

they are afraid. As soon as something goes wrong the pastor will blame it on bad tithing, 'Así se abusa la gente'.⁴⁸ Although I cannot verify this allegation, I did notice that in Panama marginalization and manipulation are terms closely associated with Evangelical churches. To avoid this stigma all together Crossroads choose not to take offerings during the service at all.

We hardly talk about money from the pulpit. It is very hard for people who come here to claim that we are after their money because we don't spend much attention to it.⁴⁹

Instead they have boxes on the walls in which people can freely donate at any given moment. On my question if that generated enough income to keep the church running I got a cheerful answer: "Well, the lights are still working!".⁵⁰

Another matter of attention is the vocabulary used in church. 'Evangelical churches don't want to know anything about ecumenism with other churches. They think they have the truth and everybody else is from the devil,' said Hurtado. Although this sentence was uttered with a tone of humor, he touches here upon an issue that both Crossroads and Calle Belén have taken very serious. Except for the youth and children in Calle Belén, a hundred percent of the people have a Catholic background and many have partners or children that do not join them to church.

Pero en el Grupo nunca jamás se habla mal de la iglesia católica. Ni siquiera la mencionamos, ¿ves? En la iglesia evangélica a veces, ósea... hay gente que por predicar la Palabra entonces comience a hablar mal de las otras iglesias y eso resulta horrible, terrible.⁵¹

Rodríguez thinks criticism on the Catholic tradition would not be accepted by his church members. Equally, Gunn says that in order to have well educated people feel at home in Crossroads, no negative talk about the Catholic Church is allowed from the pulpit. This has not so much to do with people's feelings about the Catholic Church. Even if this was

⁴⁸ Interview with Franklin Hurtado. Theologist and entrepreneur in Panama City. June 2007, Panama City.

⁴⁹ Interview Bob Gunn.

⁵⁰ For extensive research on tithing in charismatic churches see publications of Simon Coleman 2004 and 2006.

⁵¹ Interview Jorge Rodríguez.

not positive there still seemed to be a public dislike of a judgmental authority as is expressed by Delia on Crossroads.

Nos gusta a primera que nada el respeto que nosotros vimos hacia diferentes creencias. (...) Hemos encontrado allí un respeto, un ambiente sano que te permite orar al Señor. Allí nadie esta cortando la libertad del otro.⁵²

This seems to contradict the structural argument of Lalive that people are attracted to Evangelical churches because it provides them a new *hacienda* in which an authority sets the rules and condemns alternatives. The image of Evangelical churches with a preacher loudly proclaiming ‘the truth’ for hours on end is not confirmed here. It is even deprecia- ted as Velia (Calle Belén) expresses. “Me gusta como predica Jorge, directa, bien aplica- ble y tranquila. No me gusta mucho las personas que usan recursos como gritar, hablar muy alto, saltar. No me gusta, no comparto eso, no tiene necesidad de hacerlo”⁵³ Accord- ing to Rodríguez not only criticism on other churches is shunned, but a Christian vocabu- lary is avoided all together, trying to make things sound as normal as possible.

No tenemos la terminología evangélica. Ahí no me llaman pastor, ni nos llama- mos hermanos, ni hablamos con aleluya o con palabras que son como cliché. Y la predicación es cien por ciento la Palabra, pero tratando de no utilizar la termino- logía puramente evangélica.⁵⁴

This quote expresses an idea that again contradicts Lalive’s argument of Pentecostal churches as places of community and authority. The family atmosphere supported by calling each other brothers and sisters is denounced here and the pastor does not even like to have himself called by his title. It is interesting to see how this vision to appeal to a certain group has translated into daily practice of these churches. Instead of creating an otherworldly faith, they try to create an atmosphere in which people are able to bridge the gap between their daily life and Evangelical church attendance. This is for example con- trary to the conclusions Janneke Huizenga draws from her research in Bolivia in which ‘being from the world but not of the world’ translates into a strict separation for those

⁵² Interview with Delia Piron. Member of Crossroads. August 2007, Panama City.

⁵³ Interview Velia Ríos, Ríos, August 2007. Panama City.

⁵⁴ Interview Jorge Rodríguez.

who do or do not believe and keep His rules (2005: 26).⁵⁵ The believers see themselves as inhabitants of Israel who serve God in a way that sets them apart both spiritually and in the practice of daily life.⁵⁶ In contrast, Crossroads and Calle Belén rather seemed to encourage their members not to distance themselves from society but to involve themselves in it in a constructive way.

When sociologist Bomann describes a church meeting in Bogotá, Colombia she says it might be surprising for people to notice the way Evangelical services are built up: a block of worship, preaching, testimonies and prayer. Each taking up around an hour (1999: 58).⁵⁷ In Panama this was the same case. Going (in time) to the 7 o'clock service of Hosanna on Friday night I discovered the meeting would only start in half an hour and last for about three hours. In a lesser degree this also counted for Casa de Oración, whose Sunday service was started at 7.30 am and lasted till at least 10 o'clock at night. One very important church component mentioned by both the pastors and the respondents is time management of the services. A characteristic often encountered in Evangelical churches is the frequency and lengthiness of their meetings. According to Rodríguez the reason their small group within this church was so well attended had everything to do with their timeliness.

La manera como Dios nos guió para tener estas reuniones creo que era bien importante para que El Grupo [Calle Belén] creciera. Obviamente que lo principal es la gracia de Dios, pero después es importante por ejemplo que estas reuniones fueran una hora. Y éramos muy muy puntuales, de siete y media de la noche hasta las ocho y media. Y eso ayudo mucho a que las personas se quedaron aquí y poco a poco creciendo.⁵⁸

For several years their meeting was held at people's homes on Tuesdays and people would attend the general service of Casa de Oración on Sundays. But after a few years time again played a major role in continuing as an independent church.

⁵⁵ She has handled this theme in terms of being from Israel en Egypt, which are the metaphors people use for having accepted Jesus as their savior (Israel), or not (Egypt).

⁵⁶ For a theory alike see B. Smith's *Religious Politics in Latin America* (1998) that points to the possible dampening effect on citizenship by Evangelical membership.

⁵⁷ For other descriptions of Evangelical services in Latin America see for example Gill, 1990 and Cox, 1995.

⁵⁸ Interview Jorge Rodríguez.

Nos dimos cuenta que las personas les gusta mucho ir al grupo pero no eran muy convencidas de ir a la iglesia, a Casa de Oración. Porque las cultas son muy largas, de dos a dos horas y media. Y eso, a la gente que estamos alcanzando no les parecía bien, no?⁵⁹

In this quote comes to the fore that punctuality has a lot to do with the type of people they want to appeal to: ‘a la gente que estamos alcanzando’: professionals. I noticed that people coming to the meetings would usually come right out of their work and had taken an effort to plan the service in their schedules filled with work and family obligations. They are used to efficiency and punctuality, and have high demands from their spare time. The observed punctuality was seen as a sign of respect for their lifestyle.

One of the ways Pentecostalism in Latin America has gained following is by their modern marketing strategies and electronic media (Anderson, 2004: 77). In Panama 60 percent of the population regularly listens or watches religious radio or television, both Catholic and Protestant. 23 Percent of these people watches or listens to Hosanna Vision, of *Comunidad Apostolica Hosanna* (IESDE, 2004).⁶⁰ Another church active with media and receiving a lot of attention in Panama is *Pare de Sufrir*.⁶¹ In the last few years this Brazilian denomination has been the object of mockery for selling tap water as holy water from the Jordan and oil from the local super market as healing oil from Israel. The denomination even got a much talked about parody, made by La Cascara on TVN: *Pague por Sufrir*. These embarrassing incidents and the somewhat aggressive sermons broadcasted by Evangelical churches in general, made Calle Belén choose for a different way to approach people. They set up events open to everyone in which prominent figures who are Christian are invited to speak: President Jimmy Carter, Juan Luis Guerra and the first lady of Panama for instance. According to Rodríguez this has been a good way to promote a church with professionals: members can invite friends to the event and they get spoken to in their ‘own language’ by somebody who is ‘one of them’. Again these activities are organized in relatively neutral places like convention centers. Further radio or

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Another interesting conclusion from this inquiry is that a strikingly high percentage of people listens to the various Catholic radio stations.

⁶¹ Pare de Sufrir is part of the Iglesia Universal del Reino de Dios, founded in Brazil in 1977 by Edir Macedo Bezerra. This movement, with an estimated 6 million followers in 115 countries around the world, is both in and outside of the Christian community often considered a sect.

television broadcasting is left out since these can have negative, neo-Pentecostal associations.⁶²

Summarizing

In this chapter I have introduced Crossroads International Bible Church and Grupo Calle Belén Cristiano within the framework of the Panamanian religious field. The first is an international and independent church founded in the Canal Zone but later renewed as an international church with a considerable Panamanian constituency. The second is a spring-off from a church founded in the Catholic charismatic movement, now and independent church with mainly nationals. Both have a vision very much alike: reaching the well-educated middle class of Panama. The pastors and the boards they represent, acknowledge the prejudices that exist against Evangelical churches. Known as catering or even manipulating the poor and uneducated, their vision has gotten a distinct expression. The way they use location, punctuality, vocabulary, media and leave out tithing makes their church accessible for the middle class. People are not so much encouraged to separate themselves from the world but rather to be an involved participant in it. The way the church is organized is therefore not focused on creating an otherworldly culture but rather to rebut the existing prejudices that surround this very culture.

With the characteristics mentioned in this chapter Calle Belen and Crossroads do not fit the profile of Evangelical churches in Latin America sketched in literature as well anymore, because this is exactly what they try to get away from. In the first chapter of this thesis the reasons for going to an Evangelical church in Latin America were laid out. Structural change, social need and spiritual fulfillment are mentioned as push factors for people to attend Evangelical services. In this chapter I have tried to explain the pull factors: a church that through their way of organizing is able to draw the middle class and makes them feel at home in what is often regarded as a lower class phenomenon.

⁶² Interview Jorge Rodríguez.

- Chapter five -

THE RELIGIOUS CHOICES

*“No siento que me cambié de una religión a otra.
Siento que lo más importante de mi vida es la conversación
diaria que tengo con un Dios Todopoderoso.”*

(interview Meri)

In the theoretical framework of this thesis Pentecostal growth in Latin America was explained in three categories: structural change (1), social need (2) and spiritual fulfillment (3). The first category points to modernization, dislocation and capitalism causing people to look for security and guidelines in an Evangelical church. The second category sees the Evangelical church as the actor in the religious market that has been particularly successful in fighting poverty by giving practical services, psychological help and clear moral codes to improve family life. The third explanation claims spiritual fulfillment to be at the core of every human being. Evangelical churches were successful in satisfying this spiritual need both from the outside, as a U.S. religious invasion and from the inside, in the form of reinvented traditional beliefs.

This chapter will discuss why Panamanian middle classers are drawn to Evangelical churches. The argument will be formed on the basis of fifteen interviews with church members and relating their vision with the existing literature. In the former chapter we already saw how some churches organize themselves to fit a middle class audience. Now I will further explore why people choose a different direction in their religious life and what draws them to an Evangelical church. I will argue that the structural change category (1) does not fit this case very well. The social need argument (2) is relevant here in a way specific to this group, though outweighed by the spiritual argument (3). But maybe the most important conclusion of this chapter is that although these different motivations

are the reason people join an Evangelical church, but this does not directly account for a long-term commitment. The latter explanation lies rather in a worldview that gets adopted in which a personal relationship with God is experienced.

The respondents

To explain religious change in Latin America social scientists have often pointed to structural reasons in the economical, demographical and social order. To have a better insight into the details of personal choices I decided to have in-depth interviews with people of two churches to ask them about their faith, now and in the past. Because I interviewed different people I met from the women group at Calle Belén I joined, there are relatively many female respondents (11). I interviewed them before a church service or at a different moment at their house or a cafe. No special significance should be given to the small number of male respondents. It was not more difficult to get to talk to men than to women, but the type of meetings I attended brought me into contact with women easier. The men I interviewed did not seem to be bothered by their interlocutor being female. Like with the ladies, I had them choose the place of encounter which was once at home and three times in a cafe.

The respondents range from the age of 34 to 74. It was easy to get in contact with teenagers and students, but they had often grown up in a Christian family. Since I really wanted to focus on people who came from a non-Evangelical background this resulted in all respondents being adults. The respondents had their schooling in law, education and engineering among other things and half of them went to school abroad (U.S., France, Spain). Not all ended up in the profession of their education, relatively many being an entrepreneur (6). In Panama it is rather common to start your own business: one can find good jobs but entrepreneurship seems favored by many for the unlimited career possibilities. On the next page is included a data outline of respondents.

Cumplir con Ritos

Most of the informants grew up in Panama City. Without exception they had a Catholic family background. My first respondent at Crossroads, Iris, explained me there are two

Fig. 5.1 Profile of the Respondents

| Name | Church* | Yrs | Gender | Education | Profession | Family situation |
|---------|---------|-----|--------|---|---|----------------------|
| Meri | CB | 52 | f | BA law (Colombia) International law and relations (France) | Lawyer | Married, 3 children |
| Lucia | CO | 39 | f | BA Graphic design (El Salvador) | Entrepreneur | Married, no children |
| Adolfo | CO | 38 | m | Secondary school | Entrepreneur | Married, no children |
| Ricardo | CR | 39 | m | BA System engineering, MBA | Project manager | Married, 2 children |
| Iris | CR | 36 | f | BA business & accounting, MBA (U.S.) | Accountant | Single |
| Olmedo | CR | 59 | m | BA English literature, BA social work (U.S.) | English teacher | Single |
| Vivian | CB | 45 | f | BA Public Administration | Entrepreneur, Freelance project manager | Divorced, 1 child |
| Maribel | CR | 34 | f | BA business & accounting (U.S.) | Controller | Married, 1 child |
| Claudia | CR | 37 | f | Bilingual Executive secretary (U.S.) | Bilingual Executive secretary | Married, 2 children |
| Velia | CB | 49 | f | BA Business Administration | Entrepreneur | Married, 3 children |
| Tamara | CB | 35 | f | Executive secretary | Executive secretary | Married, 2 children |
| Sylvia | CB | 39 | f | Primary school teacher degree, Psychology (Spain) | Entrepreneur | Married, 3 children |
| Delia | CR | 49 | f | English, Journalism | Primary school and English teacher | Married, 2 children |
| Augusto | CR | 54 | m | Economics, System engineering (U.S.) | Entrepreneur | Married, 1 child |
| Blanca | CO | 74 | f | 2 nd grade teacher degree | Secretary | Widow, 3 children |

* CR = Crossroads, CB = Calle Belén, CO = Casa de Oración

kinds of Catholics in Panama: active believers, and those who are Catholic by culture. She said her family belonged to the second group which means she and her family would go to church on holidays and with certain life events. Living in Panama makes it almost self-evident to be Catholic. Ricardo, a respondent with Chinese- Panamanian background, explained: “Era católico. Es lo más común aquí en Panamá y hay que ser algo no? Hice todo el trámite, por tradición.”⁶³ With the *trámite* he means getting baptized and doing communion. His comment confirms Iris’ words that there are people who participate out of conviction and others out of tradition. Looking at the religious involvement of respondents, they can be divided up into two groups: those who were always interested in the religious praxis and those who were not, but had something happening in their lives that changed this. Adolfo for example belongs to the first group. He is an entrepreneur and active in youth work at his church. He said he believed in God as long as he could remember and as a kid already memorized prayers and verses by heart. Blanca, or *hermana* Blanca as everybody would call her, went to mess at 5.30 pm every day for more than half a century before joining Casa de Oración. She can also be included in this first group because of her long history of devoted religious activities.

Then there is a second group that is less religiously interested, who either grew up in a nominal Catholic family, or in a practicing family, but chose to dissociate themselves for different reasons. Velia for instance belongs to this latter group. She stopped going weekly to church because she got dissatisfied as a teenager in the effects of church assistance in daily praxis. She got married in the Catholic Church only because her husband insisted. Maribel then, was rather a Catholic by default. She was raised in a German-Panamanian family in which faith was not a big issue and they would just go to church on special occasions. She considered herself an average Christian until she went to college in the U.S. and people started to question her beliefs. Both Maribel and Velia belong to this second group because they did not consider themselves practicing Catholics for a period of time.

The purpose of this distinction is to see how people left their Catholic practices to eventually join a Protestant congregation. For the second group this is easy to explain: they either had little binding with the Catholic Church or they had deliberately left her.

⁶³ Interview with Ricardo Chang, July 2007, Panama City.

The first group is more complicated. If people were actively involved in the Catholic Church one wonders what brought a change to their situation. All of them said they really believed in God, but either felt they had not been able to get a grasp of Him or were left with questions.

Yo asistía a la iglesia Católica todos los días, me bautizaron, hice primera comunión, me casé con el rito católico. Pero nunca tuve contacto con la Biblia. Nunca. Para mi era cumplir con ritos. Sabía que existía Dios pero yo no tenía una relación con El directa.⁶⁴

These words come from Meri, lawyer, who is from a Catholic Colombian family that can count with a late uncle and Archbishop, recently nominated to become a saint. Her religious life before, she describes as ‘carrying out rituals’ while at the same time she assumed there had to be something more than that.⁶⁵ Sylvia told a similar story. Studying in Salamanca, Spain, she would weekly attend mass and read literature she picked up there. “Pero siempre me sentía como vacía, siempre me sentía si me faltaba algo.”⁶⁶ Others, like the earlier mentioned Blanca and Adolfo were active churchgoers but had both similar questions: why am I not baptized as an adult, when Jesus was? If God is never changing, how come healing and miracles do not take place anymore? The doubts of these people who are involved Catholics seem to come forth from questions about the Bible, the character of God and Jesus and their significance in daily live. The Catholic Church was not satisfying in answering their questions or desires either, which made people start looking around. Not only were other Protestant movements explored, but also oriental practices, explained Sylvia and Meri.

At the same time it would not be correct to conclude that the Catholic Church is always falling short in these type of cases because I only interviewed people who left the Catholic Church, not people with the same issues who stayed because they did find satisfying answers. The message of Evangelical churches is that all have sinned and deserve death, but gain eternal life through the crucifixion of Jesus by repenting and accepting Je-

⁶⁴ Interview with Meri Souza de Souza, September 2007, Panama City.

⁶⁵ This is an interesting comment because the Catholic Church is indeed highly ritualized with fixed prayers and recitations. However, Evangelical churches have their rites too, although they are regarded more spontaneous and ‘inspired’ by the Holy Spirit. See for instance De Witte (2003) on ritualized religious media in Ghana.

⁶⁶ Interview with Sylvia de Rueda, August 2007, Panama City.

sus as *personal* Lord and Savior.⁶⁷ This is not unlike the doctrine of the Catholic Church. Yet, while Catholic beliefs are assumed true by their rituals, tradition and inherent place in the culture, the Evangelical doctrine is assumed true because it is taught and reinforced through biblical instruction. This together with the notion of an intimate relationship with God attracts people that find less satisfaction in a traditionally ritualized expression of faith.

The fact that Evangelical churches differ from their Catholic counterpart in emphasis or doctrine does not always get noticed by everyone though. Crossroad's pastor Bob Gunn makes a distinction between what the middle class and lower class Panamanians find in Evangelical churches. He thinks that in poor churches people often might not know what the theology of that particular church really contains. Being more experience oriented Gunn thinks they do not find it as important either. Their church shift is mainly based on the experience they get in an Evangelical church, not so much on the teachings. "But people with a high education however constantly ask hard questions, and really want answers".⁶⁸ He thinks middle class Panamanians do not go to an Evangelical church because it offers them an emotional experience different from what they are used to, but because they find existential solutions there. This might just be the opinion of one pastor in Panama, but it resonates with my impression that the existential argument (3) might be more explanatory than assumed in the body of existing literature.

Searching for or bumping into the Living God

In the last paragraph we saw that the respondents who go to an Evangelical church were either inactive Catholics or they were practicing, but had doubts and questions. From both groups you can wonder what made them go to an Evangelical church. For some people this was just as simple as somebody asking them over and over to come along to church. Tamara, a working mother of two little children, said a friend just asked her so many times to come to Calle Belén that she went only to be rid of her asking. However, she came from a very difficult family situation and going to church lifted her spirits and

⁶⁷ The words of Paul in Romans 3 have therewith gotten a central place: For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.'

⁶⁸ Interview Bob Gunn.

that made her continue going. For two years she came on and off, liking it but not feeling really committed, until one day she just decided to 'entregar la vida al Señor'. Velia, who received me in her beautiful home overlooking the city, told me she was at the point of getting a divorce when an acquaintance asked her to join her to the gathering at the Rodríguez family, later the pastors of Calle Belén. She came along just to get away from the tensions in the house and was surprised to meet a people that, contrary to her idea of churchgoers, were young and happy.

Tamara and Velia, like others that were not particularly interested in religious affairs, more or less bumped into an Evangelical person or meeting and stayed on. In these cases it is more interesting to see what made them continue going than to ask what they were looking for. They did not have a searching attitude from the start but eventually got their specific reasons to stay. Some were captured by the message they heard and felt an urge to respond. Others saw their personal problems addressed and the way this impacted their lives made them stay. An example of this is the before mentioned Velia.

Fui conociendo a este Dios que antes creía muerto. Y fue para mí como un despertar, algo completamente nuevo. Me estaban hablando de algo que yo no sabía. Que él estaba vivo y que él vive entre nosotros. Y yo fui entendiendo cada versículo que decía que nuestra guerra no era contra sangre ni carne.⁶⁹ Entonces cambié toda mi estrategia. No peleé con mi esposo, por el contrario, traté entonces de atraerlo con lasos de amor.⁷⁰

Even though she was not interested in religious matters, once she got introduced to it by an acquaintance, she discovered it as interesting and relevant to her daily life. What you can wonder from her words is: why does somebody who spent every Sunday in church till teenage years say she encountered something completely new? She says that she never knew Jesus was still alive and living among us. In this Velia is not the only one. Many respondents who were not particularly interested in religious matters mention that the realization that God was still alive was key in the development of their faith.

⁶⁹ She refers here to Ephesians 6:12: For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (New International Version).

⁷⁰ Interview with Velia Ríos, August 2007, Panama City.

Comenzaron a hablar sobre una relación con Dios a nivel personal, que no rezas una oración aprendida sino que hacemos nuestra oración con ello y por allí que comuniqués con un Dios que vive. Que tú no lo tratas como una persona muerta sino como una persona viva, que siempre está contigo.⁷¹

The fact that the relevance of a living God became an important element of their faith did not mean they were necessarily looking for this from the start. Pastor Rodríguez from Calle Belén confirmed people often initially enter church for a different reason than the reason they stay for.

Lo que sucede es que cuando Dios viene a la vida de uno, Él toca nuestra alma, nuestro cuerpo y nuestro espíritu. La gente viene por necesidades, por ejemplo puede ser por enfermedades, o por necesidades económicas, o necesidades familiares. Y eso no son necesidades espirituales, pero cuando vienen buscando una solución y Dios toca su vida entonces hay un despertar espiritual.⁷²

This ‘despertar espiritual’ seems similar to what Velia eluded to when she said it was like an awakening for her to discover that the God she had long thought dead was still alive. What this shows is that people might come to Calle Belén with a social need but eventually stay because they experience God touches their lives in another area. Once the social need is covered the spiritual need, which is a rather ongoing one, makes people continue coming.

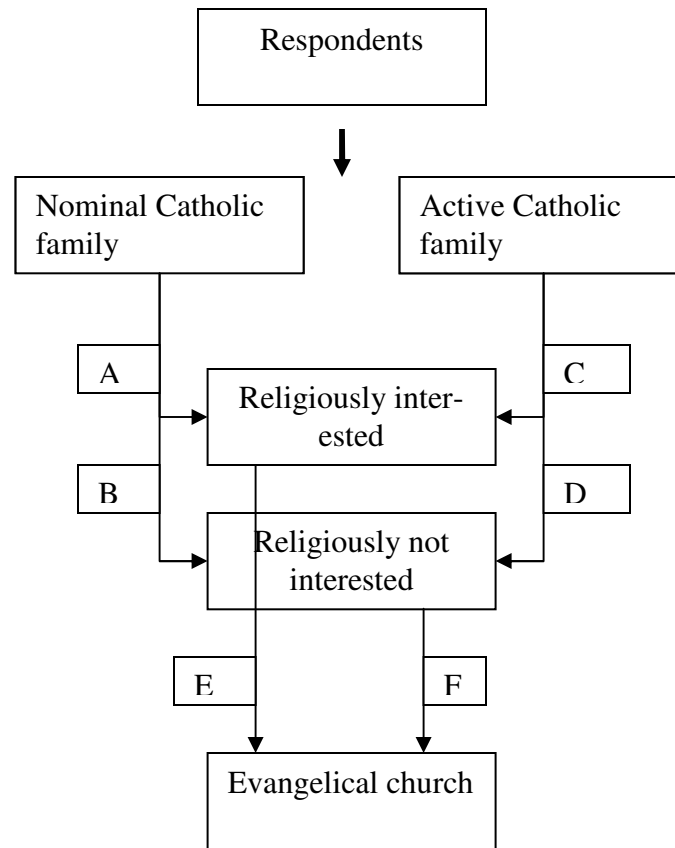
Contrasting to the group that was not religiously interested but got their reasons to stay on, there is the group that started with a religious interest fueled by questions and doubts they wanted to satisfy. In the former section we saw they all had their doubts about what the Bible teaches, the nature of God and what he could mean in their lives. Sylvia, one of the leaders of the women’s bible study I interviewed on the terrace of the hotel where Calle Belén holds their services. Looking over the wide bay of the city, she told me she was only a child when searching for a closer tie with God. She eventually thought that what she hoped for did not exist until she went to the small group of the Rodríguez family and saw an approach to faith that intrigued her and made her want the same. Meri got a client in her law practice who talked with her about believing in Jesus as a personal Savior. She would mock her client’s beliefs but one day when she was walking

⁷¹ Interview Delia Piron.

⁷² Interview Jorge Rodríguez.

to the supermarket to buy lunch giving the ridiculed ideas a second thought. “Me acuerdo de que hice una oración, pero sin pensarlo mucho, solo pensé ‘ai Jesús como me gustaría que existieras, y que vivieras y fuera mi amigo y me hablaras y yo pudiera hablarte’.”⁷³ In both these situations Meri and Sylvia had been looking for spiritual fulfillment embodied by a more personal approach to the God they had grown up with and were curious about.

Fig. 5.2 Scenarios according to religious background and interest



- A. The respondent is from a nominal Catholic family but becomes religiously interested due to extended family members, friends etc.
- B. The respondent never had a binding with religion and did not obtain that later on either
- C. The respondent is from an active Catholic family but stays religiously interested.
- D. The respondent is from an active Catholic family but disassociates himself.
- E. The respondent looks for spiritual fulfillment.
- F. The respondent arrives and finds spiritual fulfillment or solution for social needs.

⁷³ Interview Meri Souza de Souza.

Applying the three explanation models of religious growth on the way people became interested in the Evangelical message we see that structural change (1) is not of much relevance. Although many moved around and abroad for studies and work, dislocation caused by capitalism and urbanization did not seem to be an issue. It is also not likely that people lack a community. Due to the small number of citizens in Panama (around 3 million) and the capital being the prime center of business, education and politics, social networks are strong and extended. Most of the respondents grew up in Panama City, lived there most of their lives and are surrounded by an extended network of friends and family that all live in this one place. People did not seem to lack a community to be part of. A search for authority and guidelines to cope with modernity also seems far-fetched: none of the respondents mentioned anything that could be interpreted as such. Rather the contrary as we saw in the former chapter: people that are used to critically reflect on the world around them do not appreciate a judgmental attitude from their pastor.

The social need category (2) seems to fit the case better. Much research has interpreted the growth of Protestant churches in Latin America related to the trend of withdrawing governments and the rise of poverty and inequality. Evangelical churches play into this vacuum by providing food, shelter and psychological support. However, for the Panamanian middle class it is not the poverty related social need that forms a pull factor but rather solutions for marriage problems, family difficulties and depression. Pastor Rodríguez thinks the Evangelical church in Latin America is growing firstly because of a general 'despertar espiritual' and secondly because of financial and health problems people. He notes however that in his church these specific issues are less present, but do get replaced by other types of difficulties.

En el caso de la gente de la clase alto o que no tienen mucha necesidad económica, siempre tienen otro tipo de problemas en su vida por la infidelidad, el divorcio, los problemas con los hijos, esas cosas son tan frecuente en estas clases.⁷⁴

The social need factor does apply to Panamanian middle class but focused on their particular issues and less on poverty.

Just like the social need argument the spiritual argument (3) seems relevant. Listening to different people's story, Berger seemed right when he said that humans are on a quest

⁷⁴ Interview Jorge Rodríguez.

for meaning with a ‘pressing urgency and intensity’ (1967: 100). This has as a consequence that people start looking in different directions for their answers. The issue of U.S. involvement in Latin American religious affairs does have some ground. Like anywhere in the region, Panamanian culture has increasingly been exposed to foreign faiths, creating a religious market place where seekers can experiment, visit different churches and combine beliefs (Berryman, 1995). In this pluralistic environment, Evangelical churches can evangelize freely and emphasize their individual attraction. Three respondents mentioned that the link of this church with the U.S. was an attraction for them. Iris and Maribel had studied at the same university in the U.S. and liked Crossroads because it resembled the church they had gotten used to as a student. Being an English teacher, Olmedo thought going to an English speaking church held the bonus that he could keep up his language skills. But to see either of these churches as a U.S. invasion seems an overstatement since none of them get funding or other kinds of support from the U.S.

The different factors mentioned in this section indeed seem to be reason to come to an Evangelical church. Sometimes this is just an insisting friend, other times marital problems or persistent spiritual questions. During the writing process however, I started to notice a difference between why people come, and why they stay. This was triggered by a few expressions like the following “Es cierto que quizá la gente no se acerque por una necesidad espiritual, sino porque tienen una necesidad específica en otra área. Pero finalmente conocen a Cristo y recibe Su Espíritu.”⁷⁵ In order for people to really continue going, the initial motivations might become irrelevant and replaced by a new sense of finding a truth that resonates not so much with a physical need but rather a spiritual one. In this process people start to adopt new ideas about faith, God and spirituality. These ideas affect change in people’s lives which again reinforce the initial ideas. This way a positive interplay between ideas and change is the result.

I asked God to give me wisdom and understand what was going on. And I just took it as my truth. And then, well everything is different. You might be doing the same things as before, but *you* are different.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Interview Maribel Grüber, August 2007, Panama City.

El mayor testimonio que yo tenía de conocer a Cristo has sido mi propia vida. Como yo cambié de adentro hacia afuera!⁷⁷

These new ideas and the change they work out in people's lives not only alters the way one regards life now and in the future, but also puts past experiences in a different perspective. Olmedo for example was an altar boy in the Catholic Church until he got expelled at age fifteen. Being from a background *muy humilde*, his childhood dream was to once live in America "fue mi anhelo de todo mi vida, mi sueño."⁷⁸ His wish came true when he was invited to study in the U.S. However, after finishing his degree the migration laws did not allow him to stay and he returned to Panama with a degree in his pocket but a heart heavy of disappointment. During a difficult time of depression he went back to school again to get his teachers degree in English literature. After finishing his studies he got a teaching assignment in a school in Río Luís. This remote village is located in the Ngöbe-Buglé reserve and was only accessible by a three day hike before they were connected to the road system a few years ago. Now it happened that Mary and Bob Gunn were working as Wycliffe translators in Río Luís at the same time. They became friends with Olmedo and invited him to the church they had planted there. You could logically explain Olmedo's choice to join this Evangelical church with a social need argument (2). He was just climbing out of a depression, the Gunn's offered him their warm friendship and so he joined their church. But he sees this differently.

En septiembre del año 1995 yo acepté al Señor como Salvador allá en Río Luís. Todo se conjugo, porque no fue un accidente que yo fuera a trabajar allá. Todo el Señor tenía planeado. El sabía que yo estaba buscando y voy a un lugar tan lejos para encontrarlo.⁷⁹

Olmedo describes his path as divinely coordinated and sees Bob and Mary as God's instruments used towards his conversion. This example shows how one can look at the same event from different perspectives. The social scientist will try to make sense out of the event with rational arguments, but the believer might see the hand of God. The different approach is due to a difference in worldview. You could say that the social scientist is making the most 'truthful' analysis in this situation but then you do not take your re-

⁷⁷ Interview Meri Souza de Souza.

⁷⁸ Interview with Olmedo de León, July 2007, Panama City.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

search population and their worldview serious. Believers take other elements for true and real than a social scientist and this is resulting in a chasm between the academic reports and the experience of the research group.

You could say people just need a myth to compensate the emptiness of life, but a believer would not describe God as a mere stopgap. Burnett already noted correctly that even though it goes against the tide of the conventions of social science “it seems reasonable to assume that at least some people make religious decisions based on reasons that have to do with personal spirituality” (1998, xiv). It is important that in order to study religion one does not have to be religious, but one does need to believe that some people are. Anthropology has a long history of describing religious practices and the spiritual motives of the most exotic people, but when it comes down to simply describing a people that say their life has been changed by the ‘Protestant God’ all explanations seem to get boiled down to a structural extract. It is as if one does not realize that even though scientific thought and Protestant culture historically have an intimate relationship, Evangelicals, just like any group of believers, have a worldview of their own that explains the world around them in a specific way. Exactly the fact that Protestantism is interwoven with many social scientists’ cultural backgrounds makes it easy to overlook this. I think it is therefore particularly useful to dig into the contents of people’s faith because it shapes their worldview thoroughly and influences live in every area.

Conocer a Cristo

In the former section the conversion and long-term commitment are already discerned as two different stadia, of which the first will be further discussed here. Being interested in Jesus and the Bible from childhood on, or coincidentally joining an Evangelical meeting, all respondents mention a sudden moment or certain process of understanding of their faith. This ‘conversion’ is described by Lalive not only as a religious and psychological experience, but also as a physical experience of transformation and catharsis (1969: 81). Your typical image of Latin American Evangelical churches shows people shaking, applauding, speaking unrecognizable words, and falling to the ground. Only three of my respondents described their conversion as a physical experience. Velia for example said she could hear the voice of Jesus and feel an air rush of the Holy Spirit going by her face

when she was prayed for. Most of the respondents however did not mention anything physical but described it as a moment or process of understanding and, literally, ‘to get to know’ God or Jesus. It is described as something that is given to you and comes from outside yourself, but at the same time goes together with a personal desire and pursuit. The action of acceptance is commonly mentioned and referred to as a rational choice rather than an emotional affair. “Yo creí por decisión no solamente por emoción. Yo decidí creer. Y empecé a leer la Palabra,” said Meri.⁸⁰ Although she describes it as a rational decision it neither seems to be something that you can do on your own. Maribel describes the understanding of Jesus dying on the cross as a revelation that just ‘happened’ when listening to a speech of a visiting speaker in college abroad.

I think it is a miracle if you understand in your heart and inside of yourself it is true. That Jesus when He died, He was suffering partly because of *me*, Maribel. It was not of ooh humanity, no He suffered for *me*. And I feel that it is a miracle the minute that God gives you wisdom or something and you understand it is true for you.⁸¹

For Maribel this was a sudden moment of understanding to which she responded, alike the ‘despertar’ mentioned earlier by Velia. This is usually followed by an act of accepting Jesus or God’s sovereignty and authority in one’s life and usually referred to as ‘accepting Jesus’ like Olmedo did in the preceding section. It is remarkable how many respondents describe this experience in the terms of getting or feeling ‘peace’. At the same time this term stays somewhat intangible when described, like with Sylvia when she first went to a bible study of Calle Belén.

...se sentía algo que no podía explicar. Era una **paz**, la manera en que la persona hablaba, el amor con que hablaban de Dios porque yo conocí al Dios que castigaba, nunca había escuchado a una persona con tanto amor de que como Dios nos amaba.⁸²

En 2000 pasó algo, no te podría decir que fue algo radical. Más bien que sentí mucha **paz**. Yo tenía mi esposo que trabajaba, mis niños. Fui como una persona que tenía todo bien acomodado. Pero adentro no tenía nada. Así que siempre esta-

⁸⁰ Interview Meri Souza de Souza.

⁸¹ Interview Maribel Grüber.

⁸² Interview Sylvia de Rueda. Nadruk door de auteur.

ba buscando. No se que estaba buscando pero.. creo que era la paz interior que cambio todo, me hizo cambiar.⁸³

Although respondents describe their conversion as a conscious choice from their side at the same time it is seen as something that has to be given to you. And a feeling of peace and tranquility is often mentioned as accompanying the choice to accept the offer.

Joining an Evangelical Church

In the former sections we saw that sometimes people had been searching for a way to give more meaning to their live, while others were randomly introduced to an Evangelical church. Almost without exception this happened through friends, family or colleagues. All people had attended Catholic masses, sometimes visited other Evangelical churches, but they chose to stay in Crossroads and Calle Belén. From the reasons they bring up we can distill a pattern of appreciated church aspects. The most favorite element in both churches was the preaching. To describe the way of preaching in their church, people use words like: direct, very applicable in daily life, well-explained, Biblical, clear. Or like Augusto, who was initially a little cautious towards the preaching in Crossroads: “Me gusta que el mensaje va al grano, directo. El [Gunn] dice lo que tiene que decir. Lo dice y lo dice muy bien, claramente, muy bien explicado. Es un mensaje de un ser humano a otro ser humano sobre el Señor, no?”⁸⁴

The second favored element was the pastors themselves. One refers here not only to their preaching qualities but also to pastoral care, management skills and interpersonal communication. Another highly appreciated element is the community itself: the small groups, friendships and mutual involvement in each others lives. Time-management was also strikingly often mentioned and experienced as very respectful towards ones personal life and leisure time. The services being calm and innovative was equally appreciated followed by the worship music, children and teenage programs and the general atmosphere. I mention these characteristics because usually in research there is little attention given to the church *an sich* while they are major reasons for people to choose a certain church. For

⁸³ Interview with Claudia Chang, August 2007, Panama City. Nadruk door de auteur.

⁸⁴ Interview with Augusto Gamboa, August 2007, Panama City.

several people the fact that as a new-comer they are approached with friendliness and interest is a sign that within the church people really practice what is taught and believed.

Before, we concluded that people who were not religiously interested were still attracted to an Evangelical church because of the solutions they encountered here for problems in for example marriage and depression. The other group consisted of people who were interested in religious affairs already and were rather drawn in by the provision of answers on existential questions. When the respondents are asked what they like about their church, this again comes back: the preaching meets their spiritual needs and the community of believers meets both spiritual and social needs. However, when people are asked if they ever considered going to a Catholic Church again this was usually answered negatively. Not the absence of the just mentioned elements are brought forth to explain this, but the lack of stimulants they find to their personal faith. This shows again that initially people might join a church for social need (2) or the answers they attain on their spiritual search (3) but in the long run people commit because of the relationship they experience with God. It would even be possible that people join a certain Evangelical church because that place facilitates the relationship in a way that works for them. Then one should be careful to interpret it as a commitment to a set of beliefs or to an organization while it is mainly a commitment to the person of Jesus Christ.

Volver atrás

With the interviews there was one question I would usually save till the end of the conversation: do you ever consider joining a Catholic Church again? This question was often met with a look of surprise and countered with a tone of obviousness. 13 Times the answer was negative and two times rather neutral. I did not ask it to hear their criticism on the Catholic Church. I asked this question to get a clearer view on what it was about Evangelical churches that kept them there. Most people simply said they had never really *considered* to return to their Catholic tradition. After pushing them with the question why not, many respondents literally said that this would mean to do a step back. “No vuelvo atrás. Yo viví años en una religión muerto y nunca encontré fuerzas. No, no vuelvo

atrás.”⁸⁵ As was mentioned in the former section people are sometimes turned off by doctrinal issues. This concerns the adoration of the saints, Mary as intercessor, the priest as mediator, the canonizing power of the Pope, the indwelling of God by communion, the idea of salvation by baptism or works *et cetera*. The presence of these traditions is found disturbing, sometimes even insulting towards God. Although the Catholic Church is much more than just these elements, people said these issues had undermined the correctness of what is taught and practiced. On the other hand the absence of certain matters is even found more difficult.

Yo busqué mucho en la iglesia católica, busqué refugio, busqué quien hablar de esperanza, busqué y no lo encontré. Yo lo intenté, lo intenté mucho. Pero, no estaba el Espíritu de Dios.⁸⁶

La iglesia evangélica dice eso y la iglesia católica dice esa, pero lo mas importante es la relación con Dios. Yo fui a una iglesia evangélica porque había palabra. No una tradición, una monotonía, sino la palabra que es viva.⁸⁷

The one single thing that people see as a vital change in their live is that the Evangelical church has provided them with a deeper knowledge about the Bible together with the idea of relating to God in a personal, even intimate way. Although this is not rejected by the Catholic Church either, the priest traditionally takes a mediating role between people and God.⁸⁸ Regardless, some respondents felt they had always related to God in a very direct way, like Adolfo and Augusto, who as kids were yet attracted by the personality of Jesus. But others never knew faith could be so personal and were surprised by it when they ran into a group of people that experienced it this way. Again others looked for this intimacy with God because they somehow had the idea it existed. Sylvia symbolizes the way her faith changed with living in a cave compared to living on a beautiful island.

Yo creo que si no tienes punto de comparación, como si estás en una cueva y has vivido todo tu vida allá. Cuando te llevan a una isla precioso ya no quieres estar en la cueva, ya no quieres volver. Pero por la gente que viva en una cueva, eso es lo que existe.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Interview Sylvia de Rueda.

⁸⁶ Interview Meri Souza de Souza.

⁸⁷ Interview Vivian Ríos.

⁸⁸ The Charismatic Catholic Movement forms an exception to this.

⁸⁹ Interview Sylvia de Rueda.

This expression is similar to what Bomann mentions about her respondents in Bogotá: after the initial crisis that draws the people in the poor neighborhood to an Evangelical church, they stay committed because by that time their worldview has changed (1999: 68-69). Velia and Sylvia word this in waking up or discovering a world outside of the cave: the birth of a new way of looking at the world and spiritual matters. In this world a personal relationship with God is a central theme from which other activities flow that support this relationship: Bible study, prayer meetings, church attendance, fasting, social work. Going back to the old worldview is not considered as *volver atras* and every activity that supports this is no longer interesting or even avoided.

Discussion

In this chapter I have tried to answer the question why Panamanian middle classers are drawn to Evangelical churches. In the former chapter this question was turned around, explaining how some churches purposefully make themselves more appealing for this group by the way they are organized and leaving out or add in certain elements. The interviews used for this chapter confirm that people indeed appreciate the way the service is structured, well-timed and organized, although elements of location and tithing are mentioned less.

In looking at why middle class people are attracted to Evangelical churches I applied the three motives that are explained in the theoretical framework: structural, social and spiritual needs. The structural explanation (1) for Evangelical interest does not seem relevant in the life of a middle class Panamanian: there is no question of dislocation or disorientation caused by modernity and capitalism. The social need argument (2) does apply, but in a different way than is usually referred to in literature. Not poverty, illness and crime are the social needs taken care of by the Evangelical church but family and psychological problems, issues that are not so much related to financial hardship. The spiritual fulfillment explanation (3) also seems to weigh heavily, people indicating their search for 'something more': religious insight and intimacy. The initial interest is followed by a moment or process of transformation which is often accompanied by terms of 'accepting Jesus' and 'receiving peace'.

What has long confused me during this research is the incapacity of these motives to explain the entire Evangelical phenomenon. Why do the explanations for Evangelical growth work well on the greater scheme but seem so bleak and dry when applied on people's personal stories? It was Jorge Rodríguez, pastor of Calle Belén, who actually answered this question for me. People come to this church for certain reasons, often marital problems: "pero cuando vienen buscando una solución y Dios toca su vida entonces hay un despertar espiritual." Even when the initial problems for which they came are solved, people stay because they have found something that goes beyond their first motivation. In academical literature the believer's relationship to their faith is often described as a mere exchange of goods. Especially in the case of poor believers this is easy to argue because Evangelical churches are indeed successful in relieving the constant crises and daily struggles of the lower class. But even a poor Latino would look at you strangely when you ask them if their church attendance is for material reasons. This is because people do not convert to a new faith or church, but to a personal God. After the first encounter a process starts to take place that changes the believer's worldview. When Maribel heard a preacher talk about God she was not even looking for a religious experience, but his message resonated with a feeling of truth in her. She decided to accept this message "and then everything is different. You might be doing the same things as before, but you are different.". The change Maribel experiences, comes from the adoption of a new worldview. This results in a change between the initial motivation to joining the faith and the new motivation to commit heart and life to it. Whatever the initial reason to come to an Evangelical church may be: structural, social or spiritual, believers eventually return to seek the intimate communion with God that collective worship offers. To get to know the living God, to accept Jesus and to have His peace are all expressions of this communion.

- Chapter six -

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis is to explain the attraction of Evangelical churches in Panama for the middle class. To answer this question I have looked at different theories explaining religious choices and the history of Protestantism in Panama. I discussed how the researched churches are organized and what people say they find there and what makes them continue going. To look at why Evangelical churches might be attractive to a certain people I used theories on Protestant growth in Latin America. In his recent handbook on global Pentecostalism Anderson calls the sudden increase in the region one of the most remarkable stories in the entire history of Christianity. It is not surprising that after some initial hesitation many scholars have tried to capture the phenomenon in a theory.

Till this day no consistent paradigm is generally agreed upon. I therefore chose to discuss the most important ideas with the help of three categories explaining Protestant growth by what they offer to structural change (1), social need (2) and spiritual fulfillment (3). The first theories see dislocation and modernity as the cause of Pentecostal growth. In a world of sudden disorder people look for guidelines and find those in an Evangelical church with a tight knit community and possibly an authoritarian leader. The second set of theories is based on the idea of a religious plurality in which people have different options. The increased exposure of Latin America to foreign faiths has created a religious 'marketplace' in which different 'products' can be consumed. Pentecostal churches gained great popularity for the solutions they bring to people's daily struggle to survive poverty and deprivation. By providing practical services, psychological support and a disciplining set of guidelines they have gained a significant role in the lives of Latin America's poor. The last category of theories focuses on spiritual fulfillment and man's quest for meaning. Again the religious 'market' plays a role here. Pentecostal churches have taken advantage of the freedom of choice effectively with evangelizing campaigns

and media use. This way they have been able to establish themselves being a good option for people looking for answers to their existential questions.

Taking these three categories as a starting point, we looked at how Protestant churches landed in Panama. With the coming of West Indian laborers, the Methodists were the first to arrive in the middle of the nineteenth century. They planted churches in the Canal Zone and Bocas del Toro, but soon extended activities to Indian territories and the cities. Ever since the foundation of the republic, Panama has been a religiously diverse country due to the construction of the canal, the railroad and the banana plantations on the Atlantic coast. Catholicism however has always taken center stage and is constitutionally recognized as the faith of the majority. At the same time it has not been as dominant as in some other Latin American countries due to a certain mercantile pragmatism on the Isthmus and an early tradition of political liberalism. It was therefore neither difficult for Evangelical churches to be established from outside, nor to become homegrown movements in a short period of time.

More associational space was created when governments started to withdraw their social services from the growing outskirts of the city. According to the numbers of the Ecumenical department in Panama a large part of the Evangelical constituency is indeed poor, supporting the academical image of Evangelical churches in Latin America. The statistics also show that from the people who shift to attending an Evangelical church a considerable number comes from a middle class background. Certain churches draw a high concentration of this group not only by the existing networks but also by means of organization. What makes them more accessible to a middle class audience is a neutral location, punctuality, lack of Christian jargon, absence of tithing pressure and the way media is used or not used. Contrary to the 'flight from the world' assumption for Evangelical churches (Smith, 1998), people are encouraged to be involved participants in society. The way the churches researched are organized is not stimulating otherworldliness but dissolves existing prejudices of poverty and ignorance to reach out to a middle class audience.

Seeing how Protestant churches have become part of Panamanian society and how they address a different group, I have tried to relate personal stories based in a Panamanian context with the theoretical framework laid out in the beginning. The struc-

tural explanation (1) for an Evangelical interest does not seem relevant for the research group of middle class Panamanians. Even though the respondents have often studied abroad and moved around for jobs, they do not express feelings of dislocation or an urgent need for authority. For its size and set-up Panama is pre-eminently a country of strong social networks. Although greatly influenced by capitalism and world trade, disorientation does not seem to bother this particular societal group. The social need argument (2) does apply to a certain degree. When Bomann did her research in Bogotá, Colombia, she concluded that all her respondents had had a supernatural encounter of healing, divine protection or supernatural provision. Her research is staged in a very poor neighborhood setting and these experiences fit the existing problems. In a Panamanian middle class situation poverty-related difficulties are not as relevant. Struggles related to family, marriage, children and depression have replaced these difficulties however. The third explanation of spiritual fulfillment is one that many respondents elude to as well. The answers found on spiritual or existential questions in an Evangelical church is mentioned as a big drawer.

With this you could say the question of what motivates middle class Panamanians to attend an Evangelical church is answered: the satisfaction it brings to social and spiritual need are prime motivations. Even the specific elements in the two churches that people find attracting can be pointed out: the preaching, the pastor's qualities, the community spirit, time-management, organization and music. However, this leaves the question pending why middle class Panamanians commit to a faith that costs them money, time and energy. The original motivation to attend is usually of solvable nature and consequently you would expect further commitment to wane. But this is often not the case. Years after the elated moment of conversion, believers are found with an active faith. What I would like to argue is that a distinction should be made between the initial interest and the long-term commitment. The initial interest can be explained with the three different explanatory schemes, depending on place, time and social situation. One might even roughly conclude that the interest of lower classes can be found in structural and social area, while for the middle and upper class the social and spiritual argument better explains their initial participation. But it would be superficial to describe faith therefore as an opportunistic deal. I agree with Bomann that it would be mistaken to see Evangelical

churches as cash machines of sorts where people can make free withdrawals and see their emotional and material needs met. This, because the believers' relationship to the faith seems to go beyond a mere exchange of goods and services (Bomann, 1999: 42, 68). The long-term commitment results from a shifting worldview a person starts to adopt when introduced to an idea constellation in which a personal relationship with God takes center stage. People then commit to this relationship that makes such a positive contribution to their lives that one of the respondents describes it as living on a beautiful island after spending life in a cave. This conclusion drawn from an urban Panamanian setting then becomes surprisingly similar to the one offered by the farmers Sheldon Annis interviewed in the Guatemalan highlands: that their lives have changed by the knowledge that Jesus loves them personally and that they have come to love Jesus in a way unlike they experienced before (Miller, 1994: xvii). My initial hypothesis that the middle class in Panama joins an evangelical church for different reasons than the lower class, is therewith countered. The initial motivations to come to an Evangelical church might be diverse but the reason people commit, rich or poor, seems to be the intimate communion with God facilitated by collective worship. To have a personal relationship with God, to know Him, to study the living Word, to have His peace are expressions of this communion independent from the place in society.

It would be interesting for further research to dig into the way people adopt this worldview that focuses on the individual's personal relationship with God. Why do some people accept this interpretation of reality and why others not? How come some people adopt it as true, but later loose interest? Is there a relationship between the individualization of Latin American culture and a personalization of faith or vice versa? And is there a relationship between the latter and secularization? I would also have found it really interesting to apply my research question on the Catholic middle class community. How can their answers be related to their Protestant counterparts? To what extend does a difference in expression stand for a difference in experience?

This thesis started almost ninety pages ago with just one fairly simple question and ends up with a range of new, rather complicated ones. Which I'll happily leave to others to answer. :)

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