# GloPent Conference 2020

**Places of the Spirit?**

**Spatial Representations in the Pentecostalism of Latin America**

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## introduction

I am grateful for the opportunity to share before the audience of Glopent part of my research on Latin American pentecostalism. I will attempt to respond to the question of whether the places of worship of Latin American pentecostalism can be considered “places of the Spirit” or not. As analytical key I will use the concept of “representation” utilized by Roger Chartier. Before I move to responding, it is necessary to present a synthesis of the formal characteristics of the spaces in relation to the sociocultural conditions, theological ideas, and aesthetic criteria of the pentecostal communities that build and use them.

## The concept of “representation”

The topic of “representation”, though old, has been revitalized during recent decades in the fields of knowledge such as philosophy, sociology, literature, history, and others. The definitions are many and even contradictory. I base my comments on the definition made by the French historian Roger Chartier in his book *The World as Representation*. For this author, “representation displays an absence” which seeks to unconsciously transform itself into presence through the imagination, remembering, or belief. That is to say, the material is real but incomplete. And in the religious domain what is incomplete is not good, disturbing, unnerving. To make up for the absence, human beings are required to participate emotionally and spiritually to complete it. This realization, which is unconscious, is what we call “representation.” Taking this theory as point of departure, I consider that in pentecostalism, as in any other religious experience and tradition, worship spaces are always fraught with emotions, memories, and meanings, that go beyond the material domain of what is physically constructed. Many are the values that are acquired overtime, and those become part of the identity of the religious group that shares them; they are essential part of their collective memory. This non-material dimension is very important in the perception that pentecostal believers have concerning the places they use for celebrating worship; it is a component of their “representation” of the space.

The places of worship of pentecostalism not always coincide with the material existence and the way these are understood or experienced by their users. As with any other religious person, pentecostals see in their places of worship something else which outsiders cannot see. These places are fraught with intangible values such as feelings, religious ideas, memories, or expectations. These physical places are coated with a “representation” that gets translated in pentecostalism as places interpreted as spaces of visitation of the Holy Spirit, experiencing of the Glory of God, and salvation from sin. It can be anticipated that these places of worship are not even valuable in themselves as works of architecture or construction, but for what takes place there, for what the imagination, emotions, and the memories of the religious community project upon them.

## Why talk about space “representation” in pentecostalism?

As any other religious tradition, pentecostalism builds or adapts worship spaces to their liturgical needs, religious beliefs, financial resources, and other factors. The places of worship respond to diverse needs and reflect particular beliefs about God, church, human beings, and the life of the community that builds and uses them. As a result, one can learn a lot about the identity of a community from their liturgical celebrations and spatial organization. Worship places can be more revealing about the essence of a community than their moral affirmations, theological creeds, the opinion of its leaders, and other forms of communication. In that way, one can discover and understand much of pentecostalism by analysing the ways they construct and “represent” their places of worship, learning about aspects that from other perspectives would remain hidden or not become sufficiently explicit.

## Of which pentecostalism is this presentation about?

Pentecostalism is a religious movement that was surpassed by its own dynamism. In some streams it matured and strengthened, in others grew and was deformed, and even in others it stagnated and got distorted. The emergence and multiplication of groups with charismatic features, in the last decades, makes it very difficult to establish clear limits between diverse groups that identify themselves as pentecostals. The contemporary religious map is heterogeneous and complex, with many ambiguities. What is today a pentecostal Church? It seems to me that any answer would entail a dose of arbitrariness. I will also be arbitrary and will skew a group of churches in my reflection.

I will define as pentecostal an ideal model (in Max Weber’s sense) of a charismatic church that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century, in the poor urban margins of diverse Latin American cities, with an eschatological vision, and an emphasis on conversionist evangelization; a glossolalic church that believes in miracles, especially healing, and an authoritarian and paternalistic pastoral leadership; a church with fervent liturgy and a literalist interpretation of the Bible. This type of pentecostalism continues to be represented broadly, but I am not sure it continues to be the majority in Latin America.

## What characterizes the worship places of this pentecostalism?

To attempt to answer this question, I will divide my notes in four headings: a) religious experience; b) theology; c) aesthetics and pragmatism; and d) spatial structure.

*a) Religious experience*

Pentecostal architecture is shaped, in the first place, by pentecostal liturgy. This liturgy is dynamic, embodied, and emotive. It is organized as a staging of an encounter with God through the Holy Spirit. To accomplish it, a series of specific acts are carried out such as singing, praying intensely, approach the altar with humility, and invoke the Spirit with faith. It can also be advantageous that a pastor or a minister lays hands upon believers and accompanies them in their appeal to God through the Spirt. The faithful often externalize the contact with the Holy Spirit through intense body movements, dancing, gestures, crying, or expressions of joy. If this becomes a group experience, the liturgical space becomes dynamic and energized. That is why is important that the place of liturgical celebration be spacious, safe, and protected from curious gazes from strangers. An intense religious experience requires a stable, safe, and daily concrete space that fosters a compensatory stability. It is for this reason that pentecostal places of worship are spacious, without slopes, protected from prying eyes. They are designed so that the community feels protected and can calmly give itself to the liturgical rituals.

*b) Theology*

The theology and the pentecostal discourse affirm that the presence of God is manifest mainly where believers invoke with faith and are willing to submit to God’s lordship. Pentecostals believe that the Holy Spirit is sensitive to fervent praise and sincere prayer. In this sense, the divine visitation is independent from the liturgical site and it is promoted more than the spiritual and emotional disposition of the community. What determines the encounter with God is the community and not the place where worship is celebrated. This understanding is one of the legacies of Protestant theology that pentecostalism has assimilated.

Some of the main reformers refused to give any sacramental value to places of worship in themselves. Luther, Calvin, Karlstadt, Müntzer and others refused to give any mediative or bridging value with the sacred to the physical places of liturgy (temples, chapels, oratories, etc.). In their iconoclastic disposition, most of them also denied religious images and liturgical objects their own powers of promotion, intersession, or facilitation of the encounter between the divine and the human. Therefore, it is understood that if the physical place does not promote nor guarantees the encounter between believers and the Holy Spirit, the construction of worship places within pentecostalism is determined by a pragmatic criteria, and not by symbolic, spiritual, or liturgical motivations. In fact, if the aesthetic components are too attractive, pentecostals consider that these can become distractions from the main objective of pentecostal liturgy, which is to achieve a full encounter with the Spirit of God. What is visual would make difficult the sensorial experience and would not promote it, as in the case of other traditions, like Catholicism or the Orthodox, where the liturgical surroundings are very much valued. To the extent that in pentecostalism the mystical immaterial encounter with the Spirit is overvalued, the external liturgical surrounding receives a lower value.

*c) Aesthetics and Pragmatism*

Generally, pentecostal architecture does not fulfill the dominant canons of aesthetics for religious architecture. The inside of their worship places is simple, uniform, and monolithic. These places for pentecostal worship are not designed to provoke emotional psychological or religious reactions. Their walls are not covered with biblical stories nor are they used to encourage the desired values or virtues; they do not want to promote piety nor the longing for heaven through images, as is the case, for example, in the baroque religious architecture, and in a especially intense way in the Mexican Baroque style. They also do not want to show the sobriety, the love of light, and equilibrium and rationality of Protestant architecture. Many of the places of pentecostal worship were previously homes, offices, movie theatres or warehouses, which were adapted with their necessary changes suitable to be used for a worship service. Often, those places are in the process of constant change, generally in process of expansion to make room for more followers, or to respond to other emerging needs among pentecostal communities. Generally, the pragmatic dominates the aesthetic and the symbolic. As pentecostals frequently argue: “God visits the people and not the building”. And other believers add: “the true temple of God is the believer, that is what we need to take care of at every moment.”

As Pentecostal worship is ready for emotional exaltation and spiritual experimentation, hearing and felling are prioritized over seeing and meditating. For this reason, pentecostalism does not intend an aesthetics that motivates reflection or mystical contemplation through visual symbols or a suggestive atmosphere. Private prayer, individual meditation, and silence have little or no room in this liturgy. The pentecostal worship has excluded the elements and objects that may be identified with Catholic symbolism like bells, sculpture, crosses, candle sticks, images, or particular colors. The external façade tends to be a little bit more attractive than the inside of the building, but not too much. It is intended to contain some different ecclesiastical elements, in addition to the name of the community and the institutional logo, wide and visually outstanding access is valued. The breadth and importance of the door corresponds with the perennial concern of pentecostal communities, of inviting unconverted people to come to the church to “know the Lord and to experience salvation.”

*d) Spatial Structure*

Pentecostal temples are frequently, in their volumetric conception, a type of elongated cube, where the longest axis runs from the main entrance to the pulpit. In front of the pulpit there is a spacious “altar”, as they tend to call to a large section free from objects and between the pulpit and the area where the community is located. In this “altar” several important liturgical activities take place: songs, dancing, communal prayers, reception of the eucharistic elements, presentation of new members, invocation of the Holy Spirit, among others. Despite their simplicity, this space is emotionally charged for the relevance of the activities that are attributed to it. It is considered the propitious space for the manifestation of the Holy Spirit during the worship service. It is fraught with expectations. Pentecostalism “represents” it as the place chosen by God to be manifested with the greatest power to the faithful.

The aforementioned axis indicates a path that goes from the entrance to the place of worship to the pulpit, passing by the community area and the “altar”. These four spaces are complemented by a fifth space, the baptismal pool, which is often located behind the pulpit. This path indicates unconsciously the stages that people go through internally in their transformation from their condition as sinful people when they arrived to the pentecostal temple, to their baptism, and the transformation of a born again person, ready to be incorporated into the community of saints, “those who have been saved by the grace of God.” After, the person will follow the same route in reverse, going out to the world as a born again person to give testimony of the power of God and to invite other people to experience the same process of conversion. It is perceived that in its pragmatic simplicity, the pentecostal temple is not empty of religious significance: it “represents” the road to conversion and salvation.

## Are Pentecostal places of worship “places of the Spirit”?

A partial answer from the perspective of “representation.”

Before sharing my answer, I want to reiterate something that all the participants in this conference know: Pentecostalism is so complex and diverse that any definition or description is necessarily partial and skewed. In Pentecostalism, the construction of places of worship responds to diverse criteria and in some way valid. Economic resources, the social location of the membership, religious influences, the vision of the leadership, and preoccupation with collective status and image, are factors which determine the great diversity that exist in the building styles in contemporary Pentecostalism as well as in any other religious tradition. Therefore, my following notes refer specifically to the type of Pentecostalism that I tried to define at the beginning of this text, the so-called “classical Pentecostalism.”

Pentecostalism in Latin America is heterogeneous and changing, just as their places of worship are heterogeneous and changing. Their surroundings continue to be popular, low-class, and sometimes middle-class neighbourhoods, as well as in marginal spaces of large cities. Their interaction with their general context is close, so their architecture assimilates forms and motifs of construction of the region where they are located. Often, Pentecostal “temples” mimic their surroundings. Generally, their places of worship respond adequately to the community’s needs, although not always optimally in terms of functionality. Improvisation and short-term solutions are frequent, which determine the lack of a definitive planned form. Despite of how ordinary their architecture is, Pentecostals believe that there something extraordinary is always going to happen. God will be made present during the religious service and will sanctify everything that is within it, both the people and the place of celebration, even though these places may not be as beautiful, or masterfully built, or as aesthetically attractive as other temples they know in the same city or other regions.

Pentecostal worship is fraught with theophanic expectations: it is expected that the Holy Spirit visits the celebrating community, inhabit the bodies of those gathering, sanctifies their environment, and produce miracles. In pentecostal understanding, the place of worship becomes, at least temporarily, the House of God and Door to Heaver. The presence of the Holy Spirit sanctifies everything in its path, transforming the profane into sacred, and the people celebrating inside into temples of God and receptables of divine grace. Pentecostal “representation” of the worship service and its celebration has much of the miraculous built in.

Pentecostals believe they must fight for the blessing of God as Jacob did, and to engage in that battle they attend the worship service. Their fight will contribute to transform the ordinary place into an extraordinary temple of God, a different place which outsiders or those not yet initiated will continue to see it as a simple cube furnished with some pews, with some musical instruments, or maybe an expanded garage or a conditioned warehouse. But the spiritual people, the chosen, the sanctified will understand and experience it in its revealed, theophanic, and mystical dimension. The pentecostal brothers and sisters are aware that their humble meeting-place has experienced a sacred metamorphosis through the action of the Spirit of God. They, just as the place itself, have been transported to a sacred sphere that cannot be defined but can be experienced.

This experience does not deny their theological conviction inherited from Protestantism concerning the not-sacred character of temples and worship places. For pentecostals, the places of worship continue to be ordinary places in their quotidian experience, in their objective materiality, but they transform into sacred and extraordinary when the celebrating community is inside them invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit. When they experience that the sacred has become present, then the ordinary is perceived as extraordinary. Human beings, small in relation to the divine greatness, can now be likened to angels who offer tribute to God in heaven. This idea or spiritual experience is one of the reasons that explain the impact of this strand of Christianity in broad sectors of Latin American societies, and of many other regions in the world. It is not that in pentecostalism the understanding of the sacred is devalued or diluted and placed in ignoble molds. Rather, it is conceived that the overwhelming force of the Spirit transforms everything in its path, starting with the people, but continuing with the places where these people meet to have this mythical and mystical encounter.

These places to celebrate worship, austere, regular, and without great pretentions to comply with the canons of architectural aesthetics become, in the sentiment and imagination of pentecostals, places for salvation where the desired presence of God is experienced, the salvific drama is actualized, and the miracle of a new life in Christ is celebrated. A sacred performance is carried out amidst of temporarily sacralized places. These places with a religious symbolism reduced to a minimum experience a type of substitute “representation” in the sphere of the emotional and spiritual. In this represented sphere there is a cross and a redemptive sacrifice, there are lights that highlight the way of life, there are eucharistic elements to celebrate communion, and there are heavenly beings witnessing what’s happening, but above all, is the Holy Spirit disposed to grant the capacity to speak in tongues, miracles of healing, liberation from sin, or a vision of the throne of God. In this way, the “representation” that pentecostals make of their places of worship and of everything that entails, makes them something different from any ordinary place. They become special, distinct, heterotopic, sacred, salvific places; they are converted into “places of the Spirit.”

Nevertheless, we must consider that in its general transformation, contemporary pentecostalism has incorporated in its conception of worship places several elements that the culture offers, a vision of the sacred and a competitive attitude in relation to other religious proposal that participate in the religious market, which offer the symbolic goods of salvation. To the degree that pentecostalism continues to expand toward stronger economic and education sectors of society, its interest and valuation concerning the construction of its places of worship continues to be modified. Little by little these places grew in number but also in the quality of construction. The symbolic elements proper of its architecture, perhaps did not come from a mythical and religious experience, but more or less spontaneously, with the intention to make their places of worship attractive in the religious market of supply and demand of the divine. It is for this reason that, it is now possible to find pentecostal temples, especially in urban zones, of colossal presence, which are openly exposed to society. These buildings have incorporated elements that they consider traditional ecclesiastical, but in modern versions, such as stained glass, towers (without bells), portholes. Among others, they have opted for “recovering” elements from biblical tradition, emulating the temple of Solomon, creating equivalents of the “most holy place”, especial spaces for the priesthood and Levitical body, the performance of dances, etcetera. In the face of external competition, they have resorted to the Bible as the fountain from which to adopt elements that may strengthen the group in its orientation toward the outside and the inside of their own religious life. All this is part of a war of “representations”, which outcome cannot yet be determined but we must attempt to accompany critically and theologically.